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The CRPG Issue You Never Knew You Wanted

ANDY McNAMARA
EDITOR-IN-CHIEF
andy@gameinformer.com

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The Computer Role-Playing Game (or CRPG) is one of those terms in video games that makes zero sense and a lot of sense at the same time. Since all video games are played on a computer of some kind, aren't all RPGs computer RPGs? Just like all RPGs from Japan aren't necessarily JRPGs and all JRPGs aren't made in Japan, the world of categorizing video games is confusing.

CRPGs take their inspiration from the early days of developers' attempts to create player choice and agency in a digital space. Their large worlds and detailed interactions reach for the endless imagination and possibilities of a Dungeons & Dragons game, but on your monitor instead of in your mind.

Video games may never fully replicate the tabletop RPG experience, but that isn't necessarily the goal. CRPGs have their own unique strengths, and they have resulted in some of the most memorable and satisfying characters, stories, and worlds that games have to offer.

In this issue, we revel in this dream. Hopefully, we help new players find an appreciation for this sometimes-overlooked genre. It starts with a wonderful story about Wasteland 3 and its legendary founder, Brian Fargo, by Ben Reeves. Following that, we have a masterful explanation and history of the CRPG genre by Matt Miller. Then we finish with a list of CRPGs you can play right now while you wait for Wasteland 3 to hit this fall.

Enjoy the issue.

Cheers,

28 **Wasteland 3**

Wasteland 3 looks to push the CPRG genre to new heights. We interviewed several members of the inXile staff about the history of this important franchise and how they are pushing the limits of a reactive world. ***by Ben Reeves***

visit gameinformer.com daily for the latest and greatest, and follow @gameinformer on Twitter

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A look at many of the games to play on Microsoft's upcoming system at launch and beyond.

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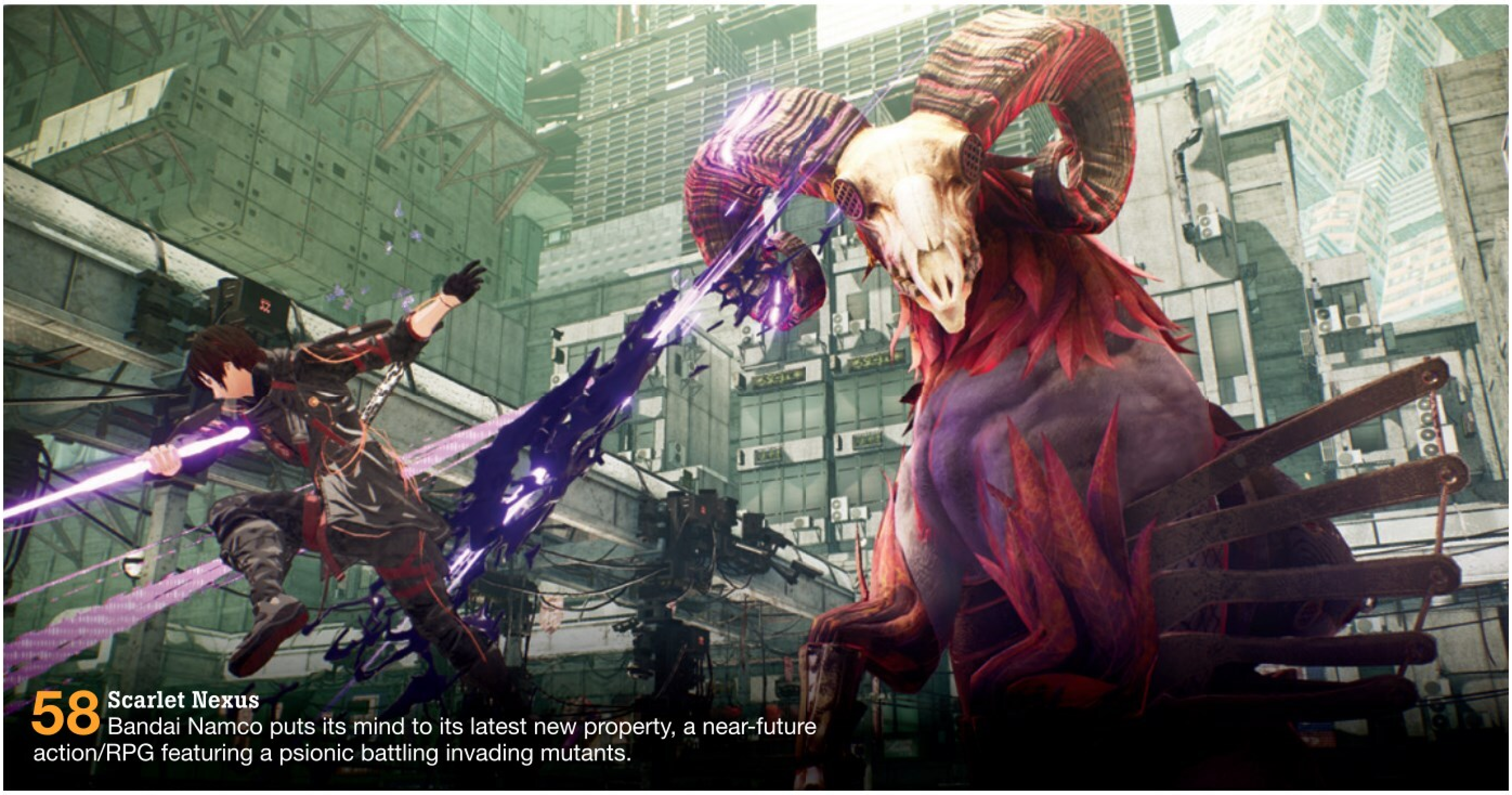

58 Scarlet Nexus
Bandai Namco puts its mind to its latest new property, a near-future action/RPG featuring a psionic battling invading mutants.

64 **Assassin's Creed Valhalla**
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68 **Valorant**
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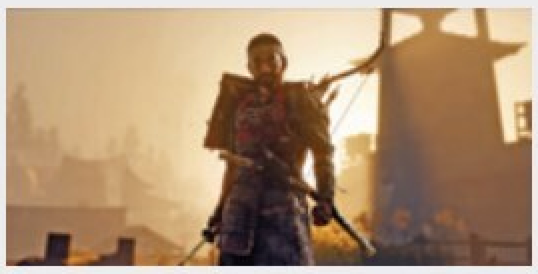
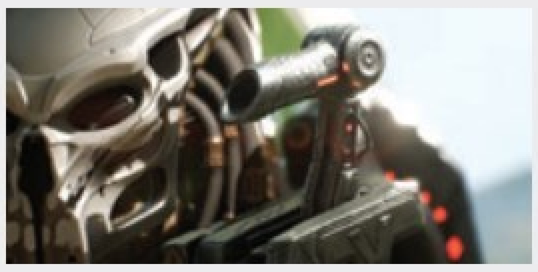


75 **Ghost Of Tsushima**
Defend the island of Tsushima as a lone samurai and a stealthy, whispered terror in Sucker Punch's Japanese tale.

77 **Trials Of Mana**
It's a faithful remake of the 1995 RPG, for better or worse.

78 **Streets Of Rage 4**
An homage to a time video games have moved beyond.



79 **Predator: Hunting Grounds**
As in other multiplayer titles, this game largely comes down to the company you keep.

81 **XCOM: Chimera Squad**
Gameplay additions dull the strategy of this series entry.

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The Gears franchise is known for its third-person action, but this tactics title is a great addition.

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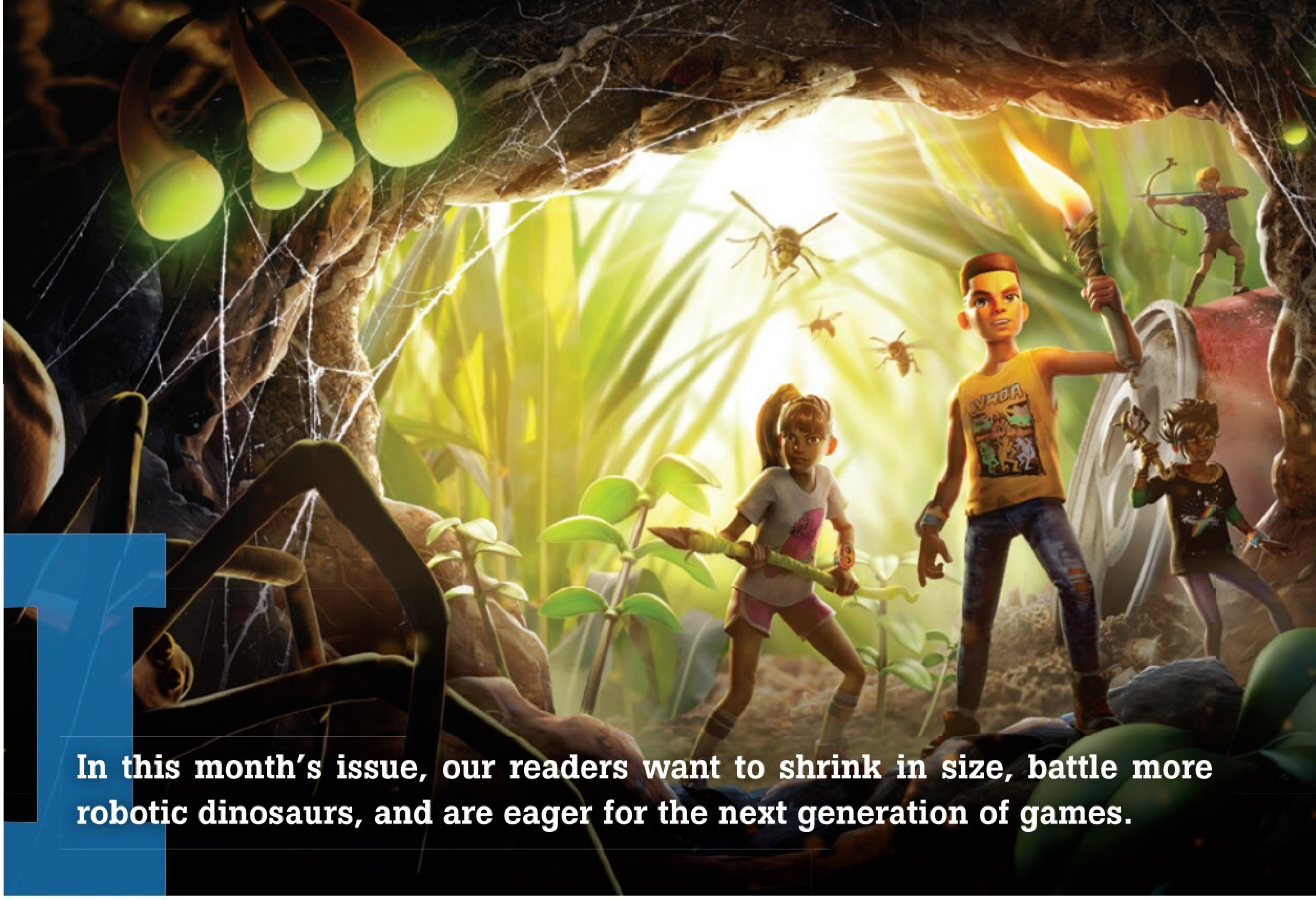
feedback



In this month's issue, our readers want to shrink in size, battle more robotic dinosaurs, and are eager for the next generation of games.

Grounded

I grew up watching the *Honey, I Shrunk the Kids* movies, but hadn't really thought of them until I opened up my mailbox and saw Grounded on my new issue of *Game Informer*. A flood of great memories came back to me about those films and the time I spent watching them with my family. I cannot wait to play this game! I had no idea it was on the way, and it sounds absolutely delightful. We need more games of this variety. Thanks for the recommendation, GI!

Tanya Williams
Stowe, VT

I didn't think much of Grounded until I saw the team behind it. Wow! Obsidian Entertainment! The studio behind Fallout: New Vegas, which is the best Fallout, not to mention The Outer Worlds, Pillars of Eternity, and Star Wars: Knights of the Old Republic II is making a survival adventure that is basically set in a backyard. I'm excited! Thanks for the awesome story. I'll be buying the game on day one.

Sean H.
via email

I grew up playing games on PlayStation 2, and I still love playing games on my PlayStation 4 and Xbox one today, but something has changed: We don't get as many intellectual properties from triple-A developers. They are usually stuck doing sequel after sequel. Remember when Rockstar Games pumped out games every year? Now we just get one or two a generation. What Obsidian is doing reminds me of when big developers took chances on new franchises. The Outer Worlds is fantastic, and I love the sound of Grounded. Here's to new experiences!

Anthony Wells
Houston, TX

Since its inception in 2003, Obsidian Entertainment has been a world-building studio, tackling everything from licensed games based on South Park and Star Wars to its own creations like Grounded and Pillars of Eternity. We always look forward to seeing what this studio is working on next, and we were fortunate enough to spend time with the team for its next game, Grounded. As much as we love being surprised by Obsidian's new IP, we also want a sequel to The Outer Worlds.

Assassin's Creed Valhalla

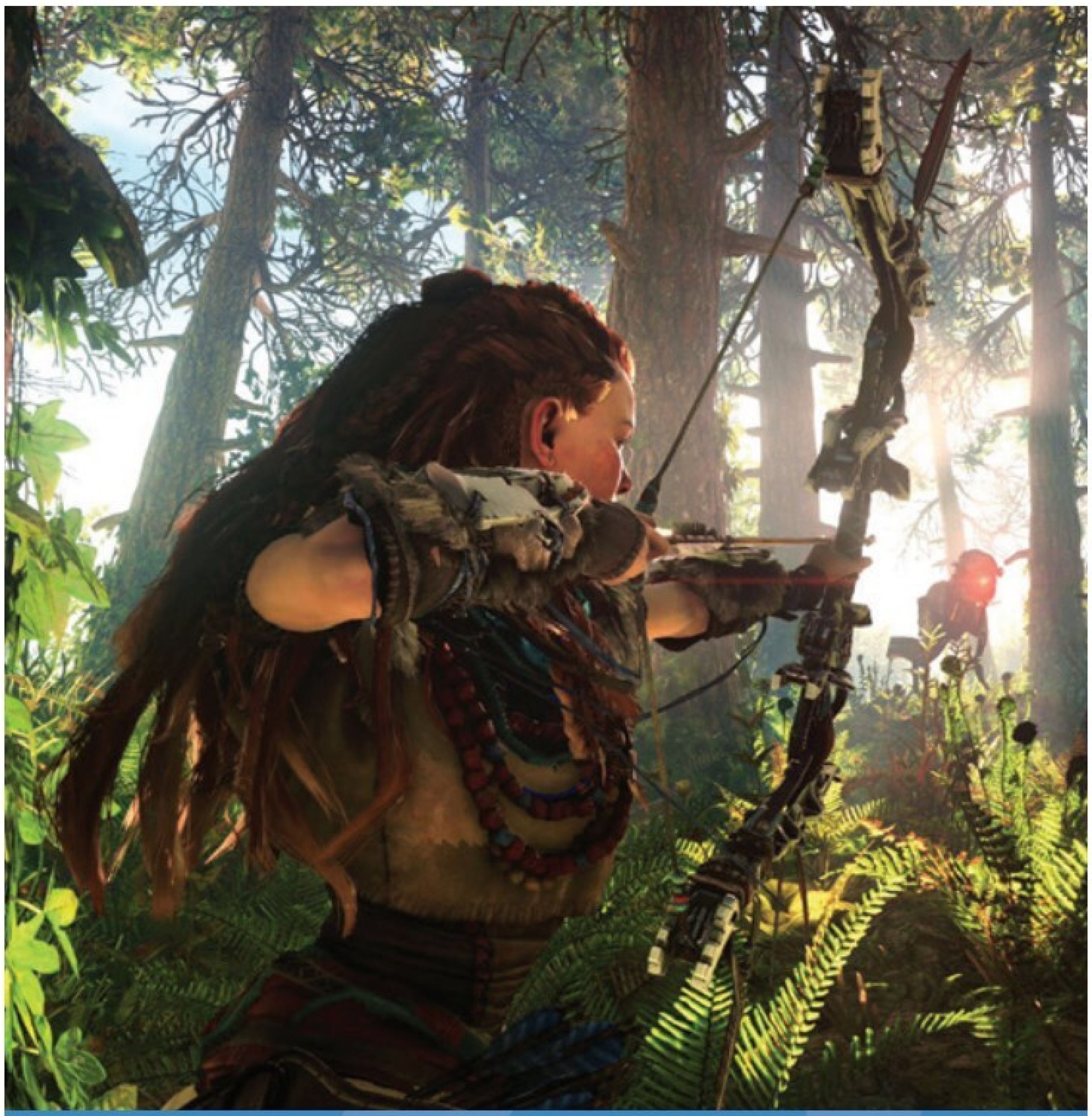
I'm a big The Division 2 player, and I was blown away when I heard Ubisoft reveal the name of Assassin's Creed Valhalla. Here's why: From the day The Division 2 launched last spring, my character has been running past posters of "Valhalla," which advertise a fictional opera for the JFK Center. The poster even shows a man holding what appears to be an Apple of Eden, which is one of the most powerful items in all of Assassin's Creed. The next Assassin's Creed game was right there in front of our noses the entire time! Sneaky, Ubisoft. Sneaky!

Clayton Stadick
Blaine, MN

Ubisoft has dropped teases for future titles before, but this time, it may have been unintentional. In an interview with *Stevivor*, Assassin's Creed Valhalla narrative director Darby McDevitt said, "You know what's crazy about that? That was a complete coincidence. It's just because The Division is made in Sweden, and they just wanted to put some stuff in there. Whoever the artist was, they just wanted to put in some of their Nordic culture. It had nothing to do with us." So that's the official story – but you can choose whether or not to believe it.

Contact Us

Send your questions, comments, and rants to feedback@gameinformer.com for a chance to be featured in the magazine!



More Horizon Zero Dawn?

Hey, Game Informers. Thanks so much for continuing to make the magazine. I know that can't be easy during the pandemic, but seeing a new issue in my mailbox lit up my day. I'm home alone and haven't had much interaction with people for nine straight weeks, but I feel like you are with me whenever I open up the issue. You are all doing a great thing of making life seem normal, when it is anything but. If I could ask one question: Do you think we'll get a Horizon Zero Dawn sequel on PlayStation 5?

Marcus Nakamura
Green Bay, WI

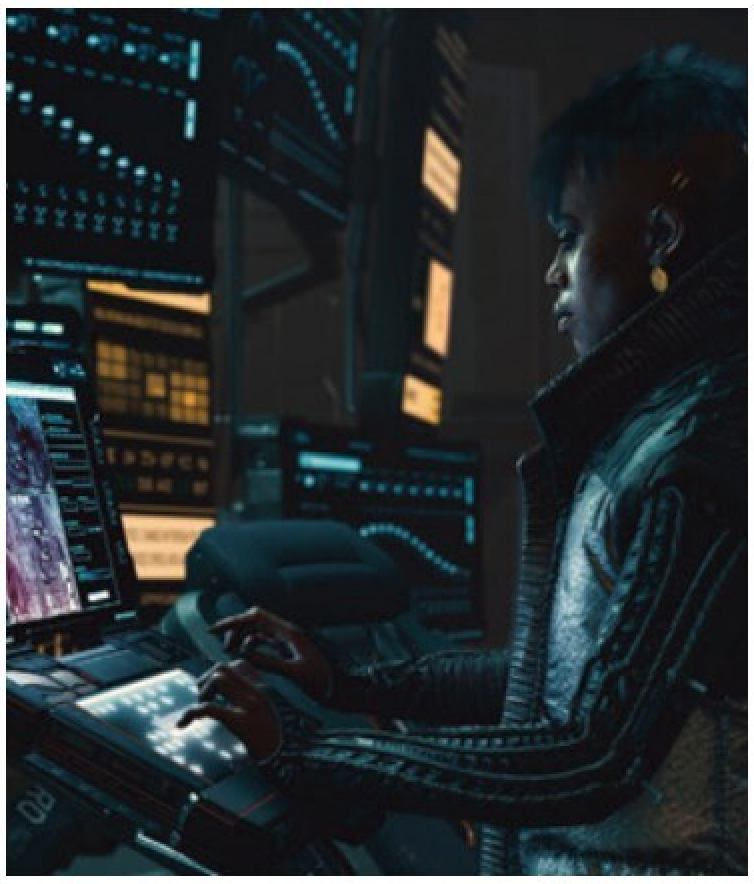
Given how enormously popular Horizon Zero Dawn was, we have little doubt that we'll see another game in the franchise. Whether that game is a sequel, prequel, or something a little different remains to be seen, but we think it's a safe bet we'll see something Horizon-related on PlayStation 5.

60 Games On The Way

With so many games getting delayed recently and PlayStation 5 and Xbox Series X launching this holiday, I thought the current generation of games was over. The last big game would be Cyberpunk 2077. Last issue's list of 60 games to keep on your radar showed me I was way off in my thinking. Most of those games are coming to PlayStation 4, Xbox One, and Switch! Do we even need new hardware with so many amazing things coming?

Spencer "Shatterstar41" Chiasson
via email

If Sony and Microsoft play their cards right with the next generation of hardware, all of those highly anticipated games will work on PlayStation 5 and Xbox Series X as well as PlayStation 4 and Xbox One. If the developers behind these games take advantage of the increased performance from the new machines, there will be a benefit to playing them on PlayStation 5 and Xbox Series X, whether it's improved visuals, shorter load times, or other things we don't know yet about what these consoles can do. No matter what, the end of the year and most of 2021 are looking packed with awesome gaming experiences. We can't wait to see what happens!



Short Answers To Readers' Burning Questions:

"Star Trek is back in a big way on CBS All Access, but we don't have games. We need a new one!"

Star Trek Online continues to be a quiet success story, but yes, we'd love a new single-player Star Trek game. Bring back Voyager as a game!

"Why did memory cards go out of style? I'd gladly buy a couple of terabyte cards to plug into my machine."

You can accomplish something similar to a memory card with an external hard drive. We recommend getting a two- to five-terabyte drive for your Xbox One or PlayStation 5.

Best Comment:

"Staying at home isn't such a bad deal when you have so many games to play!"

Question Of The Month:

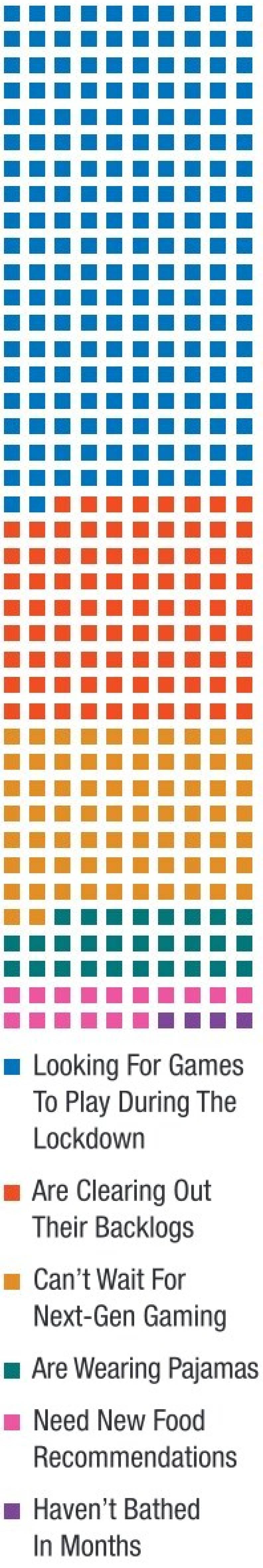
What franchise do you want to see return on PlayStation 5, Xbox Series X, and Switch?

gi spy

(Left) Sonic Team art director Hiroshi Nishiyama hasn't missed a beat while working from home, surrounding himself with beautiful art books and statues of his favorite hedgehog. **(Right)** Grasshopper Manufacture's Suda51 keeps a Switch and a huge stack of games close by while he's working from home.

PHOTOS FROM THE VIDEO GAME INDUSTRY

On Your Mind



More Collectibles, Please!

I've been collecting Batman and Star Wars toys since the early 1990s, and have recently started getting into game-related figures, thanks to the write-up you had on McFarlane's new Cyberpunk 2077 line. I'm now going back to find older figures and statues for my video game shelf. Does the *G.I.* crew have any favorites over the last few decades?

Damon Jones
Tampa Bay, FL

***Game Informer*'s Matt Miller, Jeff Akervik, and Andrew Reiner are huge collectors of action figures and statues. They say McFarlane's recent Destiny line is fantastic, First 4 Figures' Zelda statues have been great for decades, and Ubicollectibles' Assassin's Creed statues are also highly prized.**

Fallout 76 Isn't Bad Now

I recently went back to Fallout 76 to check out the Wastelanders content that supposedly would make the game more like Fallout 3. I was pleasantly surprised by the changes and ended up putting another 30 hours into it. I wouldn't say it's "redeemed," but it is much better than the trash heap it was at launch.

Ashely Crump
Atlanta, GA

***Game Informer*'s Andrew Reiner also traveled back to Fallout 76's wasteland and felt the game was better, but still wasn't where fans would want it to be. In his write up on *Game Informer*'s website, he said the addition of NPCs goes a long way in adding life to the world, and that having choice in the conversation brings back RPG elements that this entry sorely needed. It still has way too many bugs and the gunplay isn't as fun as it was in Fallout 3 and 4, but it has improved since launch – and this may be the best it gets.**

Fighting The Lockdown Blues

Last month, we asked *Game Informer* readers what games they are playing during their COVID-19 quarantines. Along with some of the biggest games of today, some classics are being dusted off…

This is going to sound strange, but the answer is Ms. Pac-Man. We have a four-person scoring competition unfolding in our house. My son Connor is the current leader, but we're all close, and all four of us have been in the number-one slot! Who would have thought that this old game would be the one we turned to the most?

Eddie Aanonson

During the day I'm playing a lot of open-world games like The Legend of Zelda: Breath of the Wild and The Witcher III: Wild Hunt – two games I didn't have the time for before – and at night I play Call of Duty with friends.

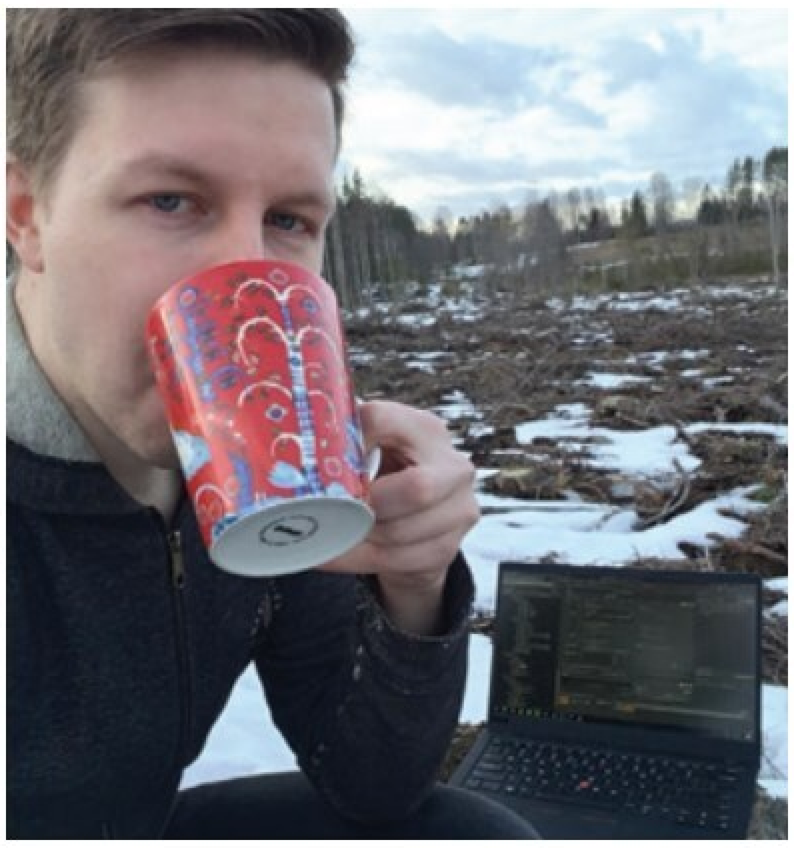
Julie Sparks

I'm finally going back and playing through the Yakuza series from Zero to whatever game they are on now. Granted, I'm still in the first game, but I have goals. Lofty goals.

Deborah Perry

I just finished Resident Evil 3, Final Fantasy VII Remake, and am now playing through Actraiser on SNES (it still works!) and Just Cause 4. I also play Animal Crossing: New Horizons twice a day.

Nick Waters



(Left) Remedy's art director Elmeri Raitanen and his cats Sissi and Hertta work on a secret project, but we suspect Sissi and Hertta are doing all the real work. **(Right)** Remedy's technical audio designer Mikko Kolehmainen takes social distancing to the extreme while sipping his morning brew.

WINNER

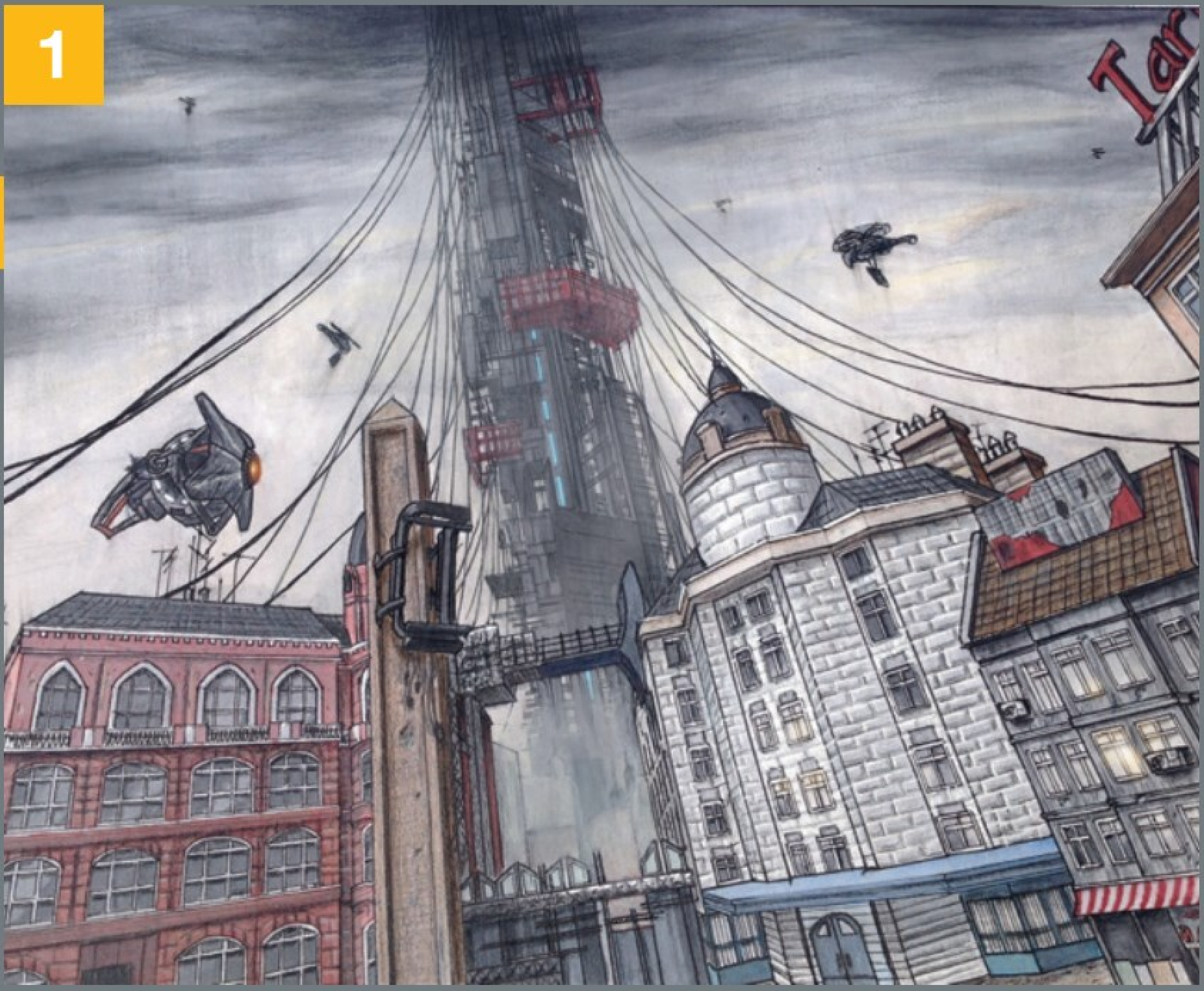
1 Arthur Aleksei
A beautiful recreation of Half-Life 2's City 17.

2 Anna Roachford
Now that Mario has a living hat, will he ever go back to his old one?

3 Josiah Jadlowski
Even if Batman wins this arm-wrestling competition, the Joker has his number.

4 Alexandar Robinson
Nintendo revealed Splatoon 2 has sold over 10 million copies and is one of the most popular games on Switch.

5 Jackie Acropolis
It's fun to see how people view themselves in Animal Crossing, and also to meet their neighbors!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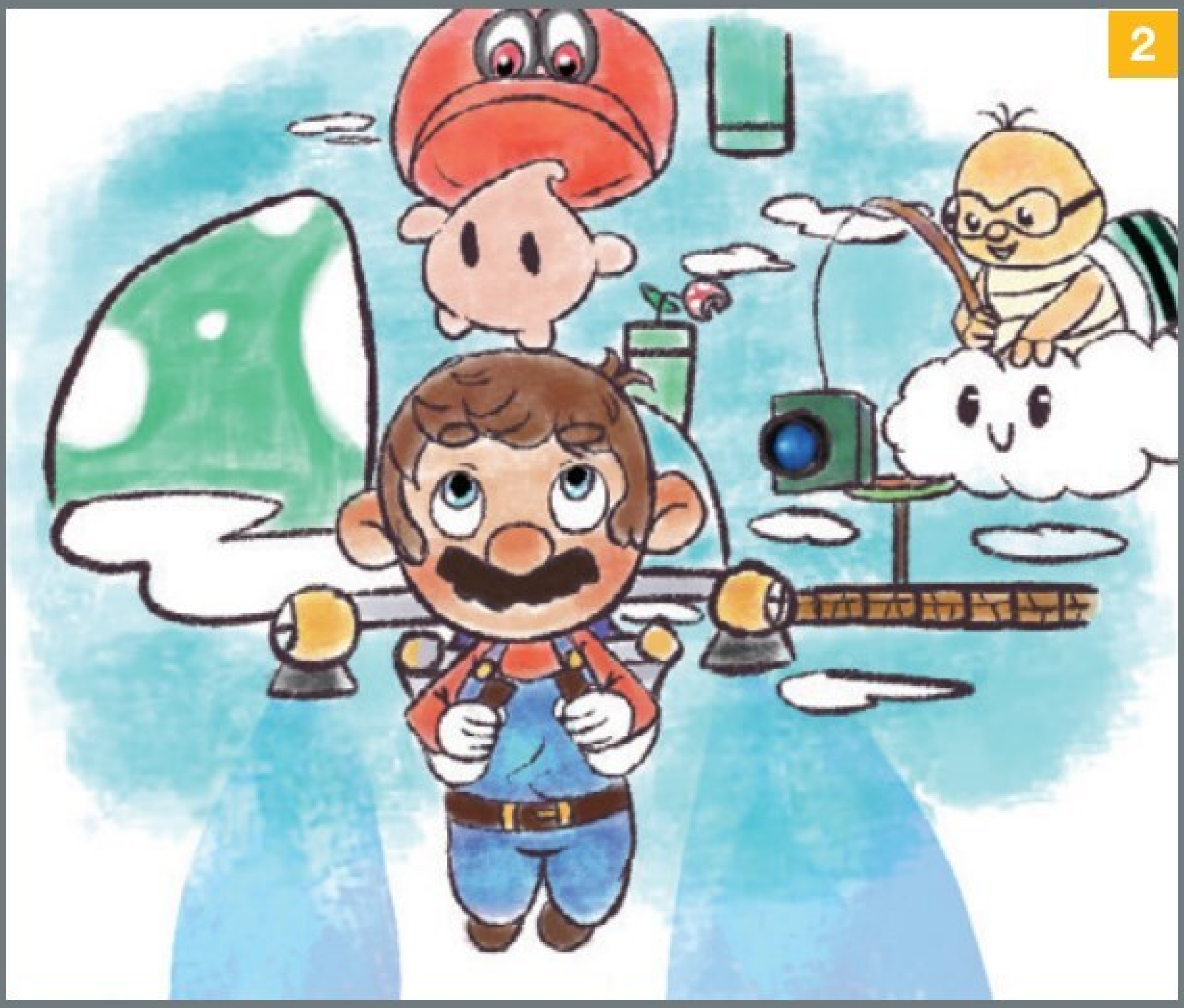
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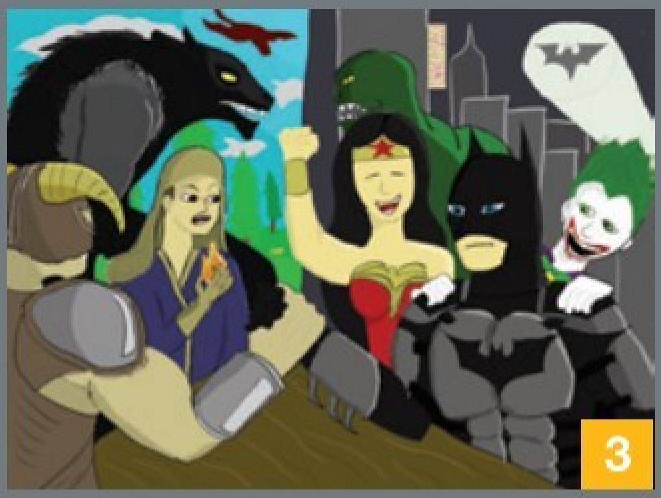
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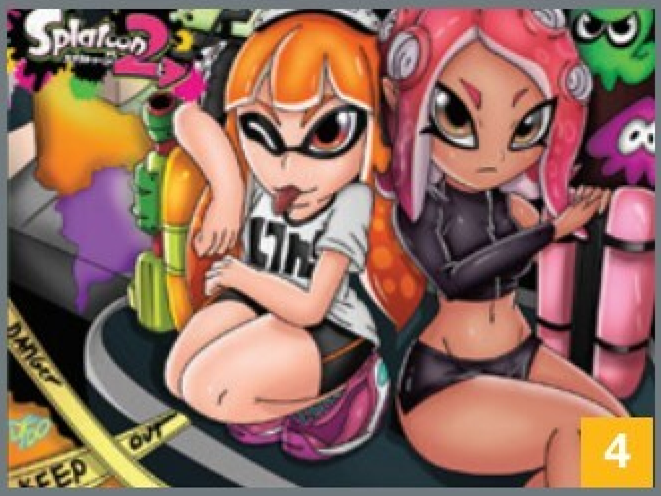

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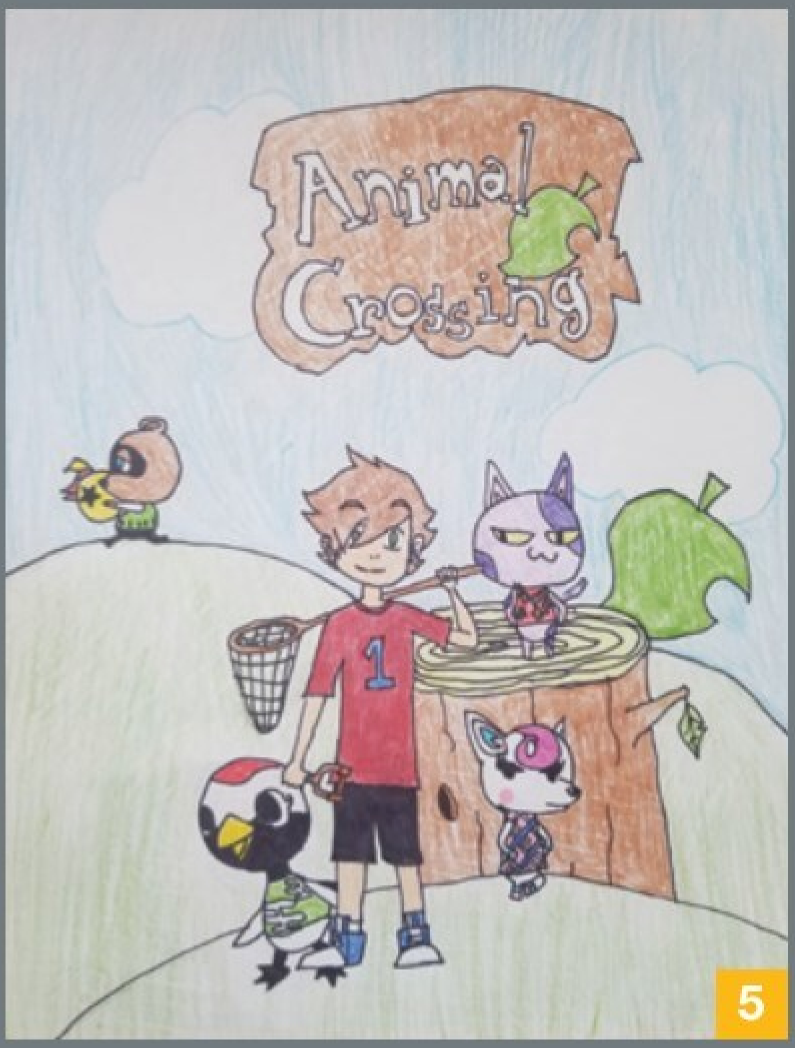

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(Left) InXile's principle environment artist Tricia Stokes fends off a vicious attack from a wild dog while working on Wasteland 3. **(Right)** Bandai Namco's Nick O'Leary spends a few minutes surfing Game Informer's website from his home office.

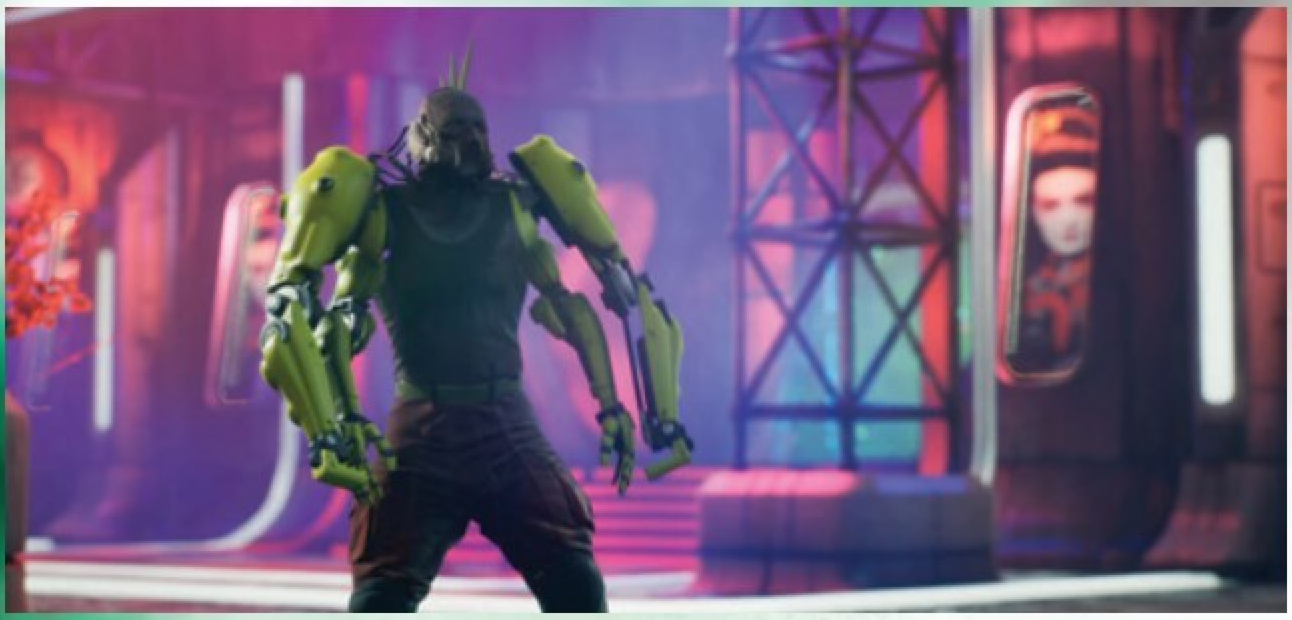
The FUTURE of X

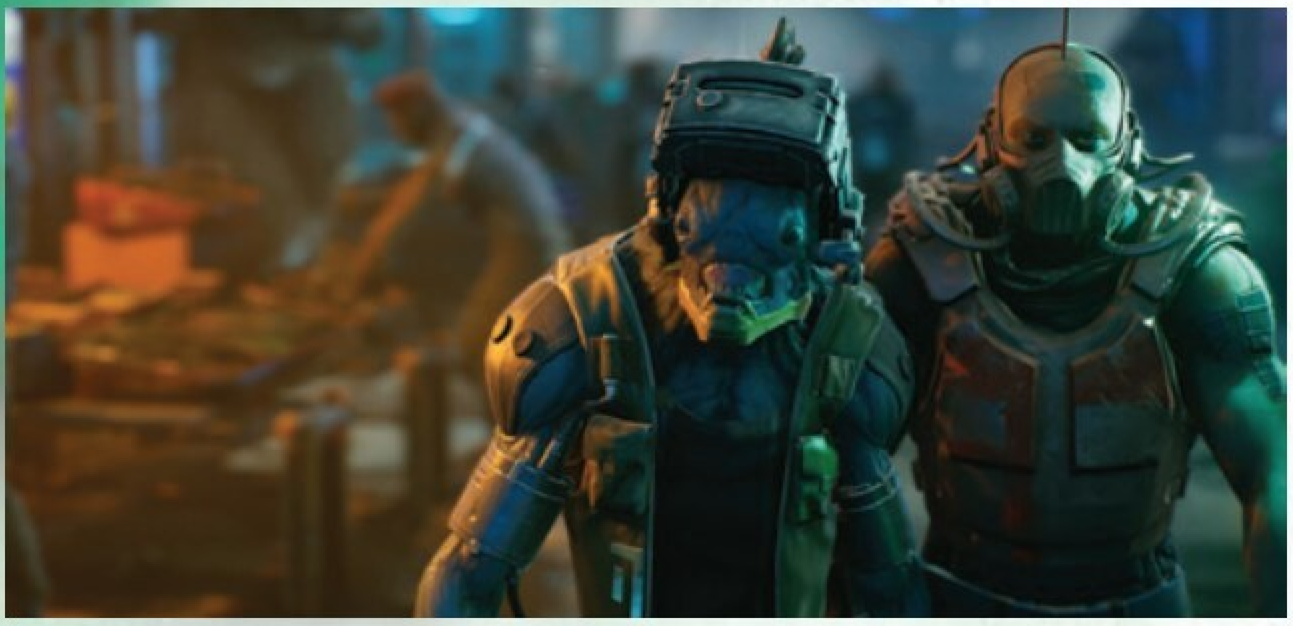
23 New Titles COMING TO XBOX SERIES X

We still don't know when Xbox Series X will launch or what its price will be, but we do have confirmation of 23 games that will release on this next-generation machine. The transition between Xbox One and Xbox Series X won't be a clean cut like we've seen from previous generational leaps. This means that many of the upcoming games that are slated to release on Xbox Series X will also be playable on Xbox One. Many of these cross-generational games are enhanced for Xbox Series X, and their performance boosts can range from reduced load times and increased framerates to improved visuals and more.

I've rounded up all of the games that are confirmed for Xbox Series X, but many more will be announced soon. Many of Ubisoft's titles like Watch Dogs Legion and Gods & Monsters are likely coming to this system, but they haven't officially been announced for it yet. Even without these games, the lineup of forthcoming games for Xbox Series X is looking promising. Here's what you can expect to play in the months and years ahead …

by Andrew Reiner



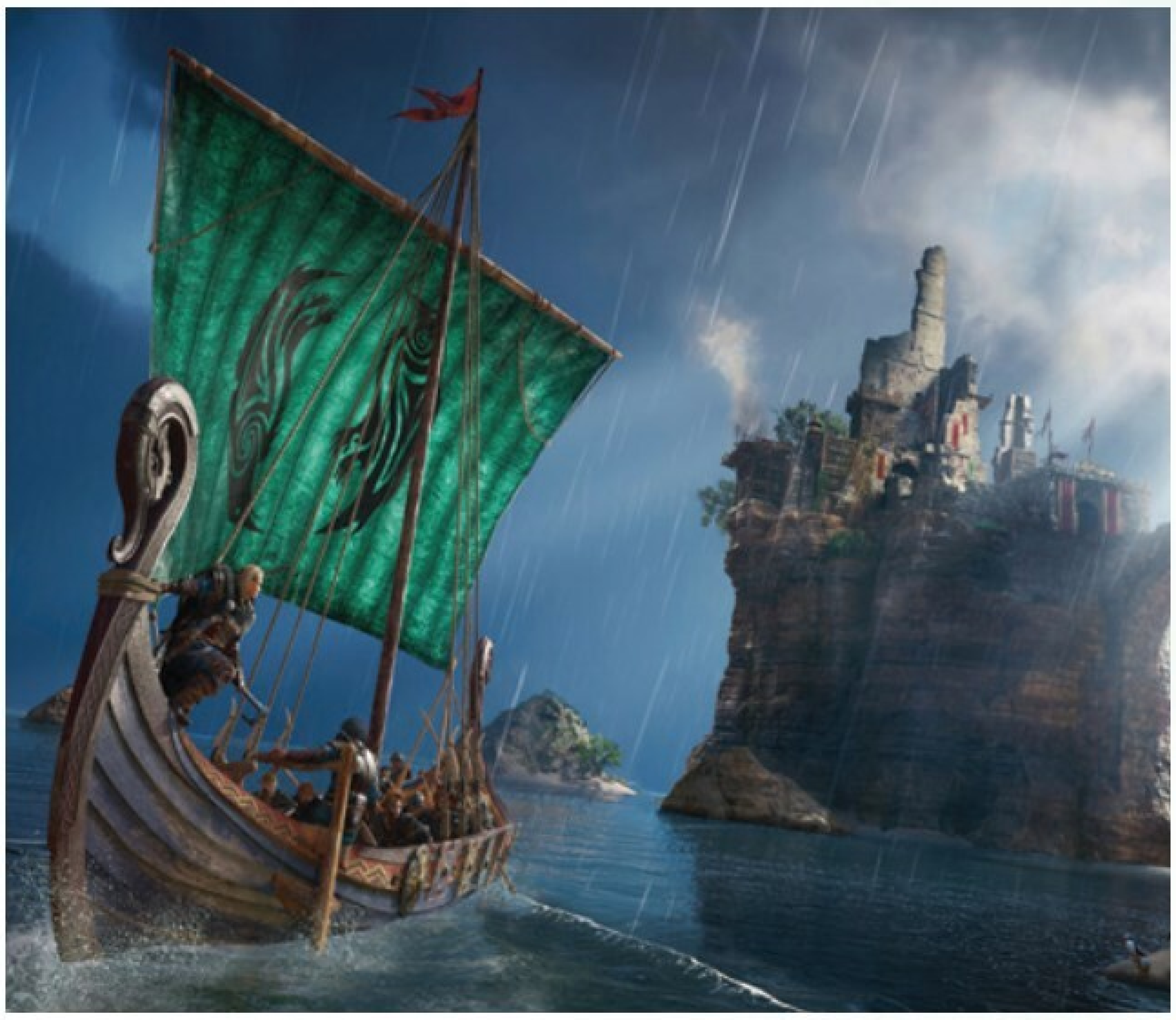


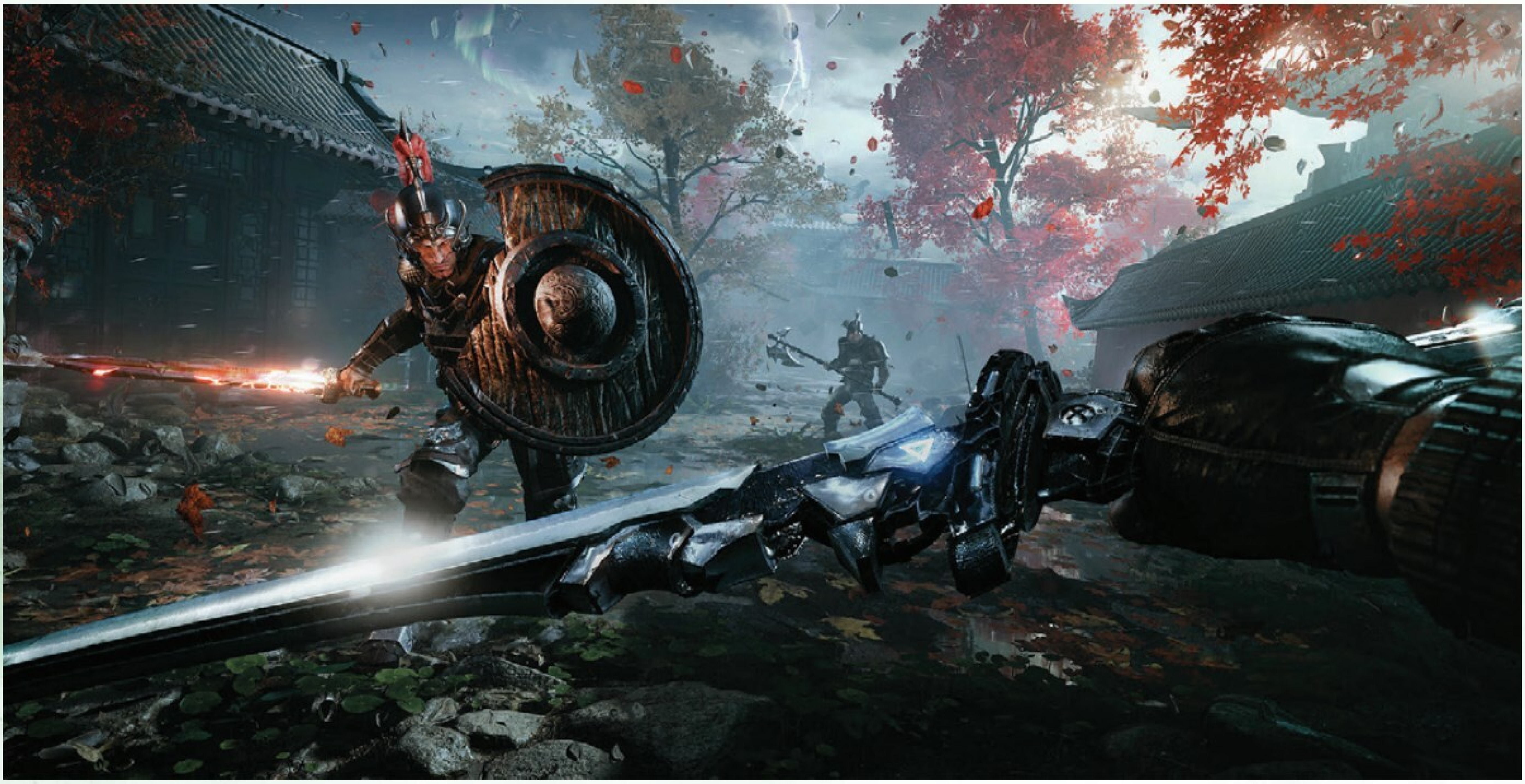
THE ASCENT

Neon Giant and Curve Digital's first game for Xbox Series X is a cyberpunk RPG that can be played single-player or with a friend via co-op. The Ascent tells the story of a world struggling to survive after a corporation that ran everything suddenly shuts down. Neon Giant is a small indie studio, but the team has worked on triple-A games like Doom, Wolfenstein, Bulletstorm, and Gears of War. The Ascent is also slated to release on Xbox One and PC.

ASSASSIN'S CREED VALHALLA

Ubisoft is putting the next installment of Assassin's Creed on most systems. No release date has been given, but Assassin's Creed Valhalla will launch on Xbox Series X, PlayStation 5, Xbox One, PlayStation 4, PC, and Stadia at some point during 2020's holiday season. This historical adventure is set toward the end of the ninth century and unfolds within a sprawling open world that recreates sections of Norway and England. You control a Viking named Eivor, who can be male or female, and can be customized with war paint, clothing, hairstyles, and more. This entry again features sailing, and introduces large-scale assaults.





BRIGHT MEMORY: INFINITE

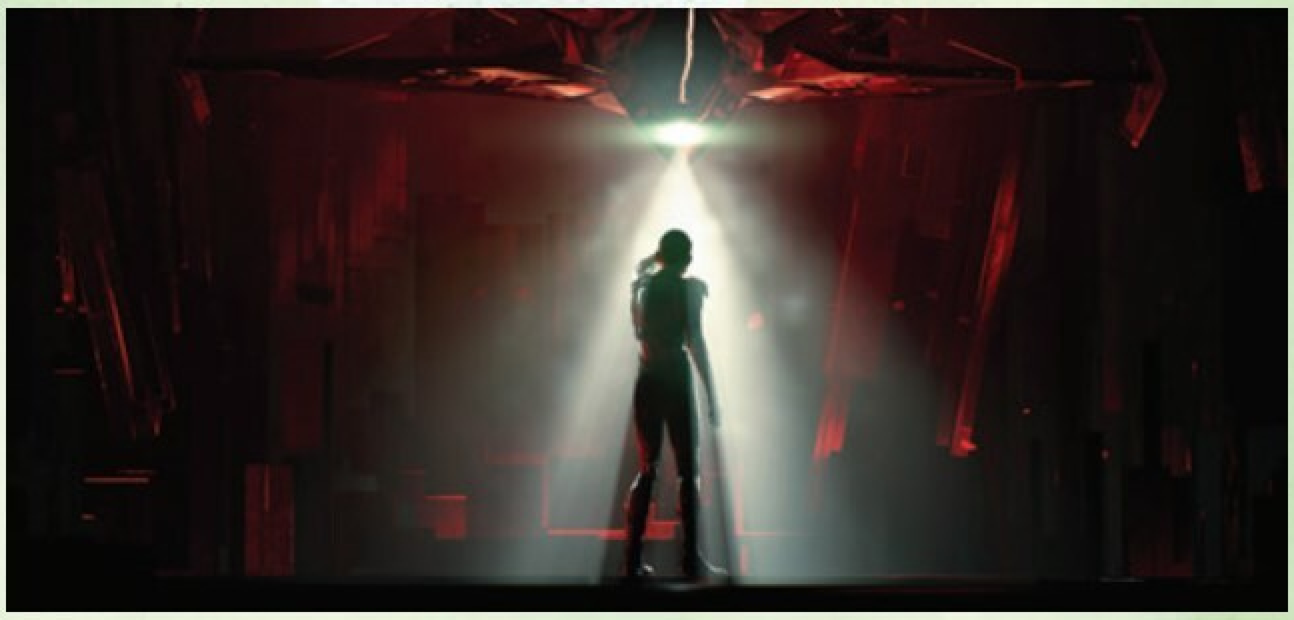
Developed at FYQD-Studio, Bright Memory: Infinite is a first-person shooter that blends run-and-gun blasting with intense melee combat. Set in the year 2036, two worlds are united by a mysterious force, and the Supernatural Science Research Organization is sent in to separate them.

CALL OF THE SEA

Your husband disappeared on an expedition to a mysterious island in the South Pacific, and you must find out what happened to him. Call of the Sea is set in the 1930s, and appears to balance first-person exploration with puzzles. Publisher Raw Fury calls it an "otherworldly tale of mystery, adventure, and self-discovery."

CHORUS

Deep Silver and Fishlabs' story-driven space shooter puts players in control of a pilot named Nara and her sentient starfighter Forsaken. The odd duo attempts to take down a cult to which Nara has a mysterious connection. The action appears to blend third-person walking segments with intense aerial and space combat similar to Star Fox. Chorus will release on both Xbox Series X and Xbox One.



CYBERPUNK 2077

CD Projekt Red's highly anticipated open-world RPG comes first to current-gen systems on September 17, but will be enhanced for Xbox Series X at a later date. The update will be free to people who purchased the game on Xbox One. Cyberpunk 2077 invites players into a dark, tech-driven world where augments are rich and difficult choices sculpt the narrative and who you can interact with.

DIRT 5

Following in Forza Horizon's tracks, Dirt 5's racing unfolds within a joyous festival atmosphere filled with upbeat tempos, fireworks, and vibrant colored streamers. Codemasters says this beautiful racing experience can be played in either 4K at 60 frames per second or in 1080 at 120 frames per second. Voice actors Troy Baker and Nolan North are along for the ride in a narrative-driven career mode that features guided, yet non-linear racing challenges. Dirt 5 also features dynamic weather and a stronger focus on multiplayer.

GEARS 5

An optimized version of Gears 5 will be available at launch for Xbox Series X. Along with faster load times, the Xbox Series X version features higher resolution textures, more volumetric fog, and greater particle counts. The Coalition showed off a tech demo that had the opening cutscene running at 60 frames per second in 4K. The team said the game is running at over 100 frames per second on Xbox Series X, and they are striving for 120 frames per second for the multiplayer modes. Gears 5's update will be free to players who already have the game.

HALO INFINITE

Master Chief is ringing in Xbox Series X's launch with a new adventure that follows the events of Halo 5: Guardians. This entry also acts as a sort of spiritual reboot for the beloved first-person shooter franchise. We don't know what this means yet, but moving away from numbered entries suggests a shift in Microsoft's approach to the series. We'll have to wait to see what developer 343 Industries is cooking up, but getting a new Halo on launch day is a hell of a way to introduce a new console. It won't be exclusive to Xbox Series X, however, and will also launch on Xbox One and PC.

THE LORD OF THE RINGS: GOLLUM

Daedalic Entertainment is doing something unexpected with J. R. R. Tolkien's famed fantasy series. Rather than seeing Middle-earth through the eyes of the fellowship or any other heroic figure, this adventure unfolds from the perspective of Gollum, the cave dweller corrupted by the One Ring. Envisioning an entire game around this odd character is difficult, but Daedalic clearly has an idea in mind and is calling it a "stealth-action adventure." Little is known about Daedalic's project, but it will take place in huge environments holding many questlines. Daedalic is eyeing a 2021 release for Xbox Series X, PlayStation 5, and PC.

MADDEN NFL 21

The pandemic may lead to a radically different NFL season, but Electronic Arts' vision is holding true to the sport we all love with hard-hitting action viewed by energetic crowds. Few details are known about how this year's edition will be different than previous iterations, but EA says it is placing a strong focus on "what you can feel." If you purchase Madden NFL 21 on Xbox One by December 31, 2020 you can upgrade to the Xbox Series X version for free up until March 31, 2021.

THE MEDIUM

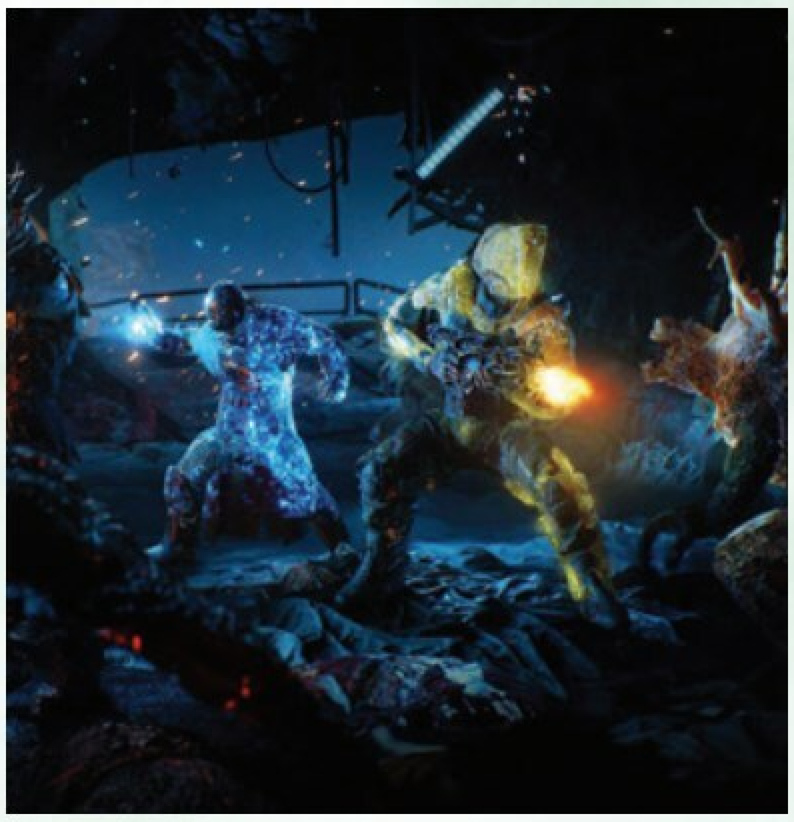
Bloober Team, the studio behind Layers of Fear, Blair Witch, and Observer, now wants players to experience horror within an abandoned hotel in The Medium. As you investigate a child's murder, you explore the darkened real world and the spirit realm. Along with plenty of jump scares, the haunting music is created by Bloober Team's Arkadiusz Reikowski and longtime Silent Hill composer Akira Yamaoka.

MICROMAN

Become the smallest man on Earth in this new adventure game from developer Glob Games. Slated to hit Xbox Series X, PlayStation 5, and Switch in the second half of 2021, MicroMan fully explores the dangers of being just a few inches tall, including having to use a fork to fend off an ant attack.

ORPHAN OF THE MACHINE

If you like Ecco the Dolphin and Metroid, you should keep an eye on Dynamic Voltage Games' Orphan of the Machine, which is currently set to release on Xbox Series X this fall. You must navigate an underwater labyrinth, gain powers along the way, and battle fish and ... robots. We can't wait to see how the sci-fi elements come into play. In a tweet, Dynamic Voltage Games said, "Orphan of the Machine was inspired by many games – a huge inspiration was Metroid. You're going to have a jellyfish floating though space?! Fine, I'm going to have you fighting robots underwater."



OUTRIDERS

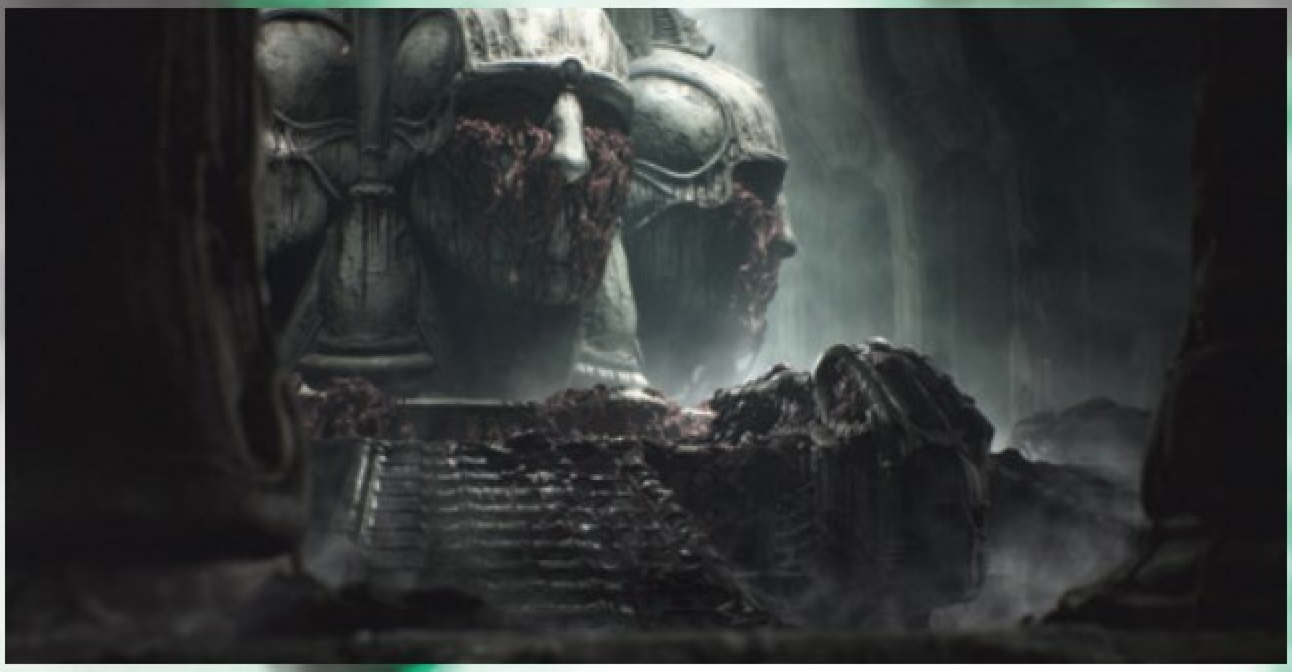
Square Enix and People Can Fly's third-person co-op shooter is coming to Xbox Series X, PlayStation 5, Xbox One, PlayStation 4, and PC in the fourth quarter of this year. Outriders blends cover-based shooting with mutant-like powers that are tied to four different classes. You can play as a Pyromancer, a Trickster that can manipulate time, and a Devastator with seismic powers. The fourth class has yet to be revealed, but all of them feature deep skill trees and plenty of loot to obtain. Outriders also delivers a lengthy sci-fi story set on the planet Enoch that begins with your crew hunting for the source of a mysterious signal.

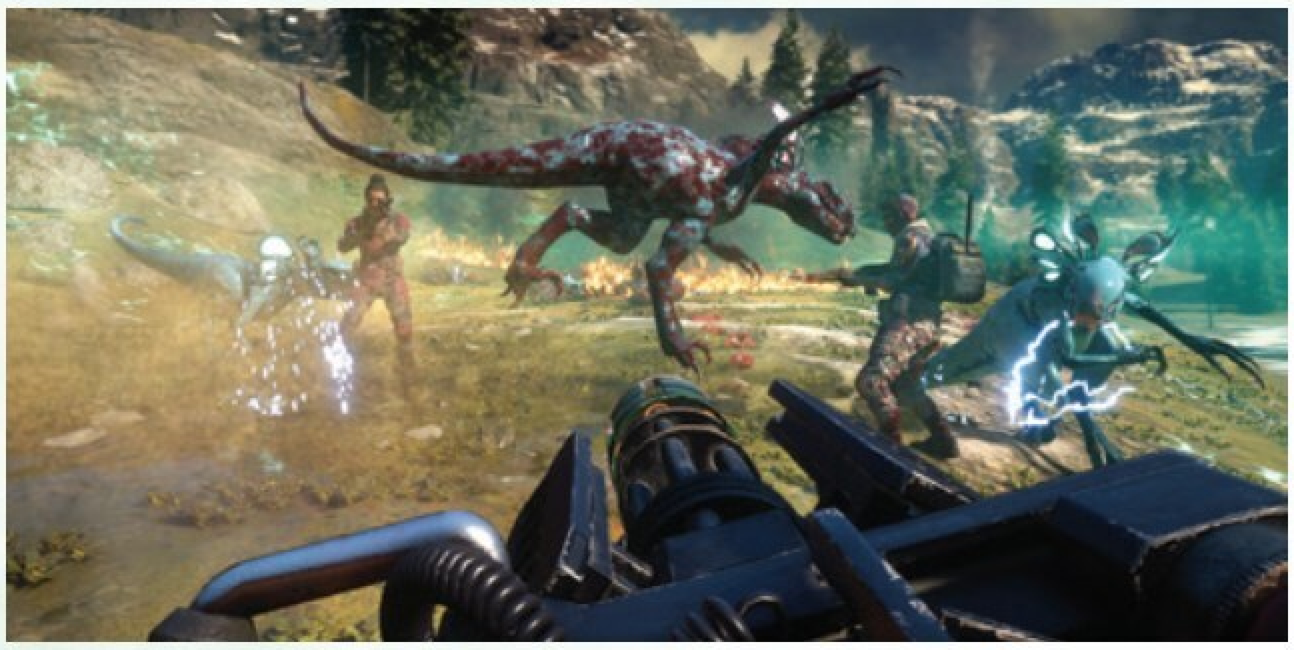
SCARLET NEXUS

Master the art of psychokinesis in Bandai Namco's futuristic RPG Scarlet Nexus. This beautiful-looking experience unfolds in a fictional city called New Himuka, a place divided by those who worship technology and those who embrace psychic abilities. You play as Yuito Sumeragi, an ambitious psionic who wants to become one of the world's most powerful users. In the trailer, we see he eventually becomes powerful enough to throw cars with his mind. Scarlet Nexus is a part of Microsoft's Smart Delivery system, meaning if you purchase it on Xbox One, you get the upgraded version on Series X for free. The game is also coming to PlayStation 5, Xbox One, PlayStation 4, and PC. For more on Scarlet Nexus, see our extensive first look on page 58.

SCORN

Heavily inspired by the work of H.R. Giger, Ebb Software's Scorn is an atmospheric first-person horror shooter. It is set on a disturbing alien world that players can explore in a nonlinear fashion. Scorn is slated to release on Xbox Series X and PC.





SECOND EXTINCTION

Developed by Systemic Reaction, the Avalanche Studios Group that released Generation Zero, Second Extinction is a first-person shooter with a strong co-op focus. Up to three players can team up to battle waves of mutated dinosaurs. Earth is overrun with these wild thunder lizards and you must use heavy artillery to mow down aggressive raptor swarms and even rampaging tyrannosaurs.

SENUA'S SAGA: HELLBLADE 2

We don't know when Senua's Saga: Hellblade 2 releases, but it's one of the first games Microsoft used to show off what the Xbox Series X is capable of. Ninja Theory's work on the first game was nothing short of stunning, and we can't wait to see where Senua's story goes next.

SOULBORN

Based on Norse mythology, this open-world RPG from developer Pixelmad Studios isn't slated to launch until the end of 2021, but we're already getting looks at the game in action. Players assume the identity of a Soulborn demigod named Brynjar Townshield, who wields Mjölnir and is tasked to prevent another Ragnarök created by the beast Nidhöggr. Mjölnir supposedly comes to life and can transform into weapons and creatures. Soulborn is also in the works for PlayStation 5 and PC.

VAMPIRE: THE MASQUERADE – BLOODLINES 2

The sequel to the 2004 game, Vampire: The Masquerade – Bloodlines 2 invites players into the dark corners of Seattle, Washington where nightwalkers and ruthless cults reside. Most of the vampiric action unfolds in first person, but the camera pulls out for specific actions, such as showing your created character scurrying up walls. When you begin the game, you have to select your power: bat summoning, levitation, summon mist, or the traditional vampire assortment of attacks. Vampire is also coming to PlayStation 5 and PC.

WRC 9

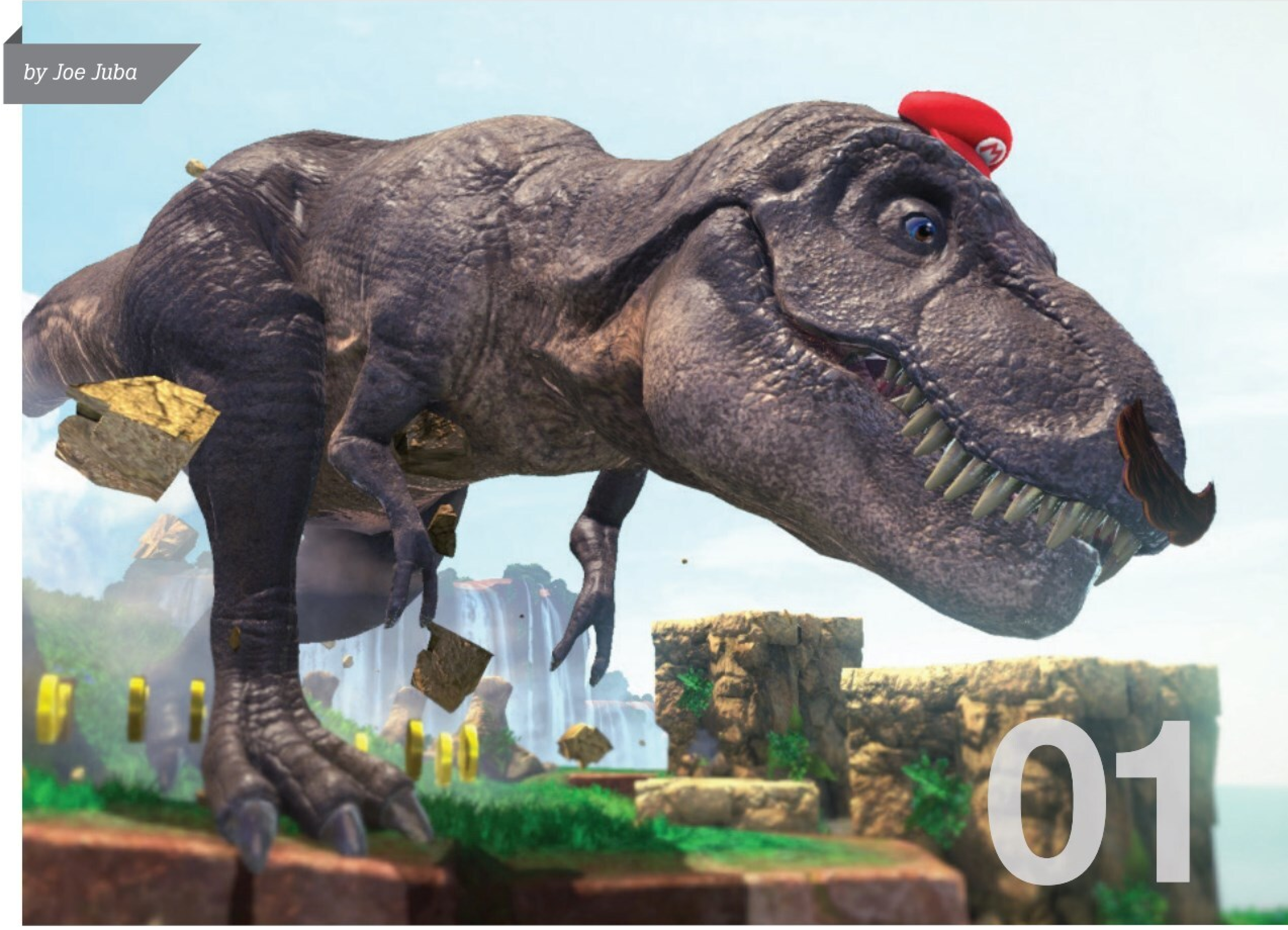
Launching on current-gen platforms on September 3, WRC 9 will later hit both Xbox Series X and PlayStation 5. WRC 9 features added realism like tough gravel in certain races. Players can get behind the wheel of cars from Hyundai Motorsport, M-Sport Ford, and Toyota Gazoo, which can be used in new rallies held in Kenya, New Zealand, and Japan. WRC 9 will have an enhanced career mode with a wider variety of events and upgrade options.

YAKUZA: LIKE A DRAGON

Sega is changing up Yakuza's formula in Like a Dragon. Series protagonist Kazuma Kiryu is getting a breather and players will now control a new character named Ichiban Kasuga. Yakuza's signature real-time combat is also being retired for RPG-like menu-driven battles. This is the first Yakuza game to launch on Xbox at the same time as the PlayStation 4 version. Like a Dragon can be played on Xbox One and Series X.

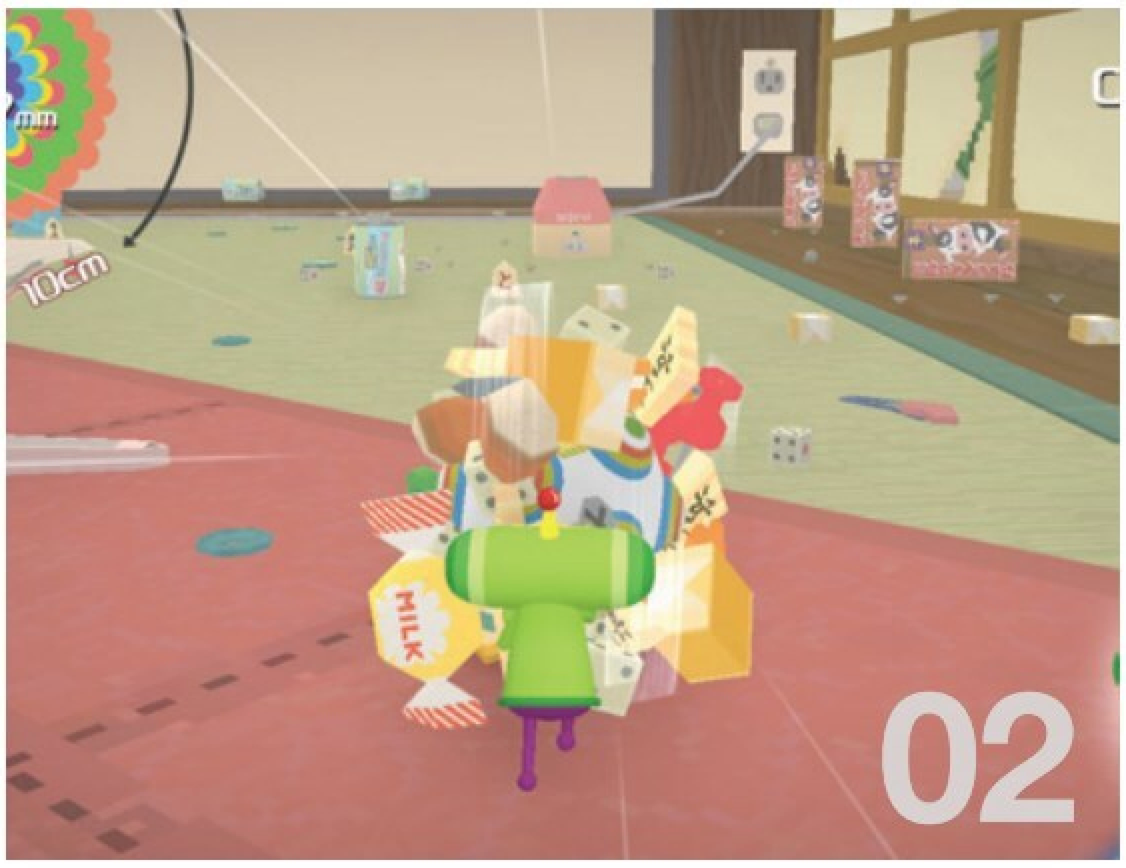
GAMES THAT MAKE US SMILE

by Joe Juba



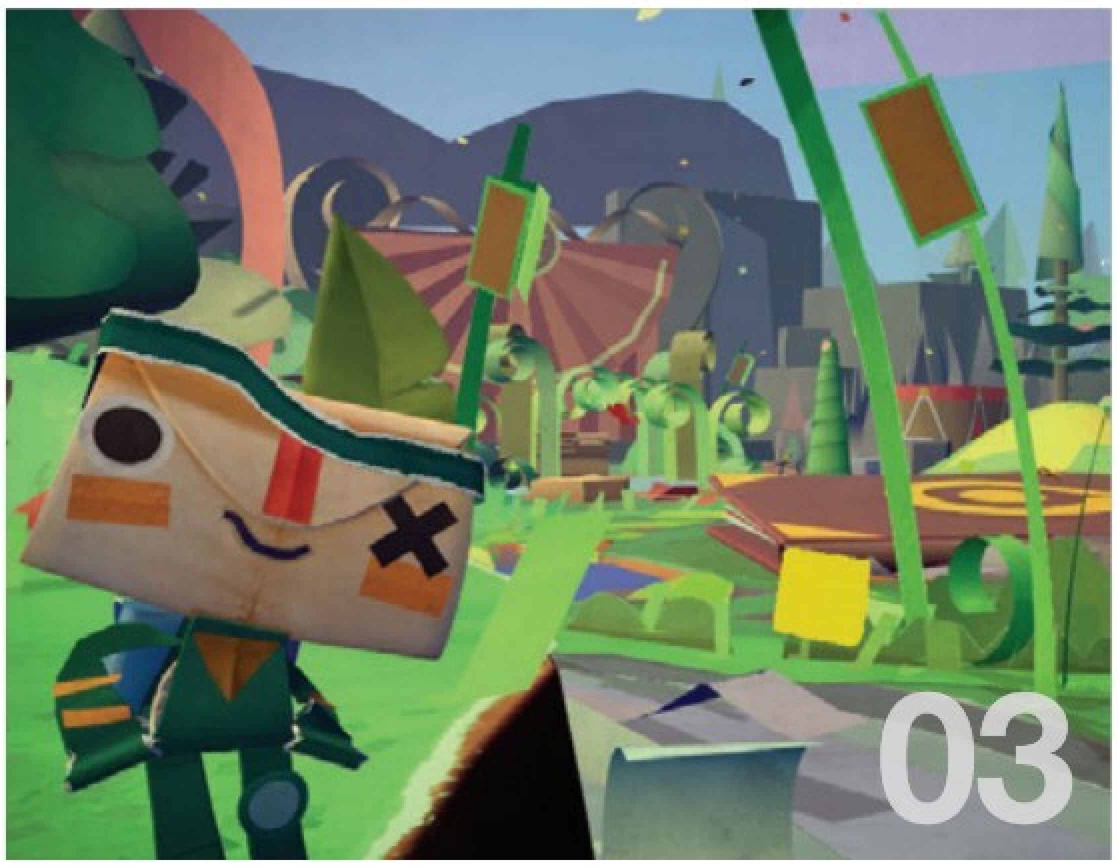
Super Mario Odyssey

Ever since he stomped his first goomba, Mario has embodied the wholesome joy of gaming. Odyssey keeps that legacy alive by giving Mario the ability to control enemies by tossing his hat at them. You can't help but laugh as you experiment with your foes' inventive abilities, like throwing cookware as a hammer bro, fishing as Lakitu, and rampaging around as a T. Rex. Every enemy Mario captures is like a fun new toy to play with.



Katamari Damacy

From the core concept to the background music, everything about Katamari Damacy is delightfully strange. As a tiny prince, you must roll a magical sticky ball around to gather up progressively larger objects and hapless living things. When the ball is big enough, it becomes a gleaming celestial body. You don't need to understand it to love it.



Tearaway

Tearaway's surreal world and appealing papercraft aesthetic have an irresistible magic that immediately pulls players in. In fact, the Vita camera literally puts you in the game, projecting your face onto the sun. This lighthearted touch fits perfectly with the imaginative platforming, puzzles, and tactile interactions that make Tearaway so memorable.

Untitled Goose Game

Who isn't amused by a little small-town mischief? That's the goose's specialty in this game, causing minor inconveniences left and right. Stealing vegetables, dunking things in water, and scaring people with loud honks aren't inherently good acts – but that doesn't mean you can't enjoy the reactions of the annoyed villagers.

Flower

Flower is more like an interactive poem than a traditional game. You ride the wind as a collection of petals, soaring freeform across beautiful plains and hills. If you need to tune into a serene wavelength, Flower is a peaceful and emotional meditation that will bring a blissful grin to your face.

Animal Crossing: New Horizons

Life is full of hardship, but your life-simulation games don't need to be. The world of New Horizons is relentlessly positive; you connect with nature, customize your surroundings, and build a thriving village full of residents who love you. It may only be a virtual community, but it has enough friendship and charm to feel like home.

QUICK SCORE
206,890
TOP SCORE ISAAC
300,000
10,000
50,000
50,000
07

Peggle

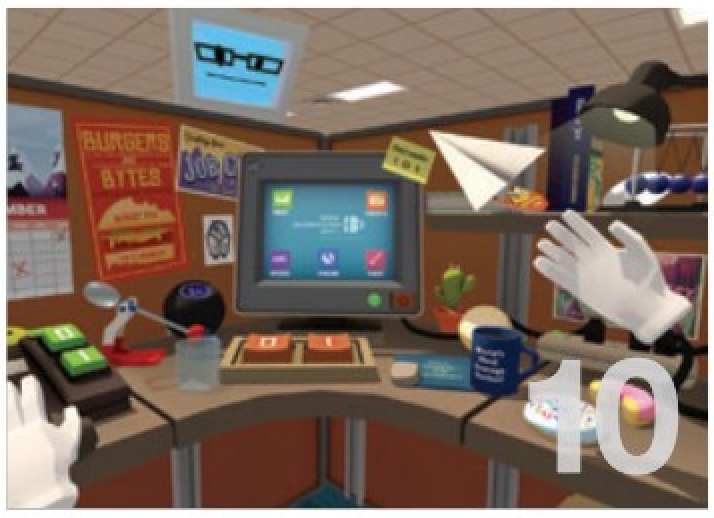
Skill isn't the most important part of Peggle, since your success depends on the lucky bounces of a tiny ball. Even so, you feel like an absolute champion whenever you complete a stage. As the last brick disappears, the action goes slo-mo, the camera zooms in, and Beethoven's "Ode to Joy" blares in a satisfying and over-the-top celebration.

A Short Hike

Just relax and surround yourself with the wonders of nature. That's the goal of A Short Hike, which has you taking a short-but-sweet trek up a verdant mountainside. A fun gliding mechanic allows you to find your own path and explore distractions at a leisurely pace. Plus, the laid-back journey is wrapped in a simple retro aesthetic that fits the experience perfectly.

Slime Rancher

Keeping creatures in captivity for the purpose of cross-breeding the most profitable hybrids might sound ghoulish, but Slime Rancher makes it downright adorable. Fill your pens with happy, bouncy slimes! Feed them their favorite foods! Harvest and sell their droppings! Even the hard-to-contain slimes are impossibly cute, so you can never stay mad at them.



Job Simulator

Have you ever wanted to antagonize your customers and throw stuff at your boss? Job Simulator lets you live out these fantasies in VR, putting you in a reactive playspace full of fun objects and absurd situations. Whether you're making copies or serving hot dogs, the in-game physics create haphazard and hilarious versions of everyday tasks.

The Good

Epic unveiled PlayStation 5 demo footage of its new **UNREAL ENGINE 5**, which provides developers with impressive toys for utilizing film-quality assets, improving lighting, and much more. The engine is available next year.

Epic also announced that not only is Fortnite coming to the PlayStation 5 and Xbox Series X at the launch of those systems, but that the game is transition to Unreal Engine 5 in mid-2021, with players' progress and purchases making the jump, as well as keeping cross-platform play.

The Bad

It's two years in a row that wrestling fans won't be able to play a **WWE 2K** game. Last year's WWE 2K20 (the first iteration developed solely by NBA 2K studio Visual Concepts) was a buggy mess, and now publisher 2K Games has outright canceled WWE 2K21. At least the new arcade title WWE 2K Battlegrounds (by Saber Interactive) is coming out this year instead.

Hackers not affiliated with Sony or developer Naughty Dog got ahold of **THE LAST OF US PART II** early (the game comes out on June 19) and have spoiled key aspects of the story online. The hack was possible due to a historic security flaw with multiple games from the developer, but the studio has closed the exploit since the hack. Until you play the game, search for info on it at your own risk. ◆

The Ugly

Quotable

"Hey, no big deal, but nobody wants your stupid mobile version of Skate 3."

Pro skater **Jason Dill** on The Nine Club podcast. Dill says he was approached by an Electronic Arts rep to appear in an as-yet-unannounced Skate 3 mobile game. He was hoping for Skate 4 instead.

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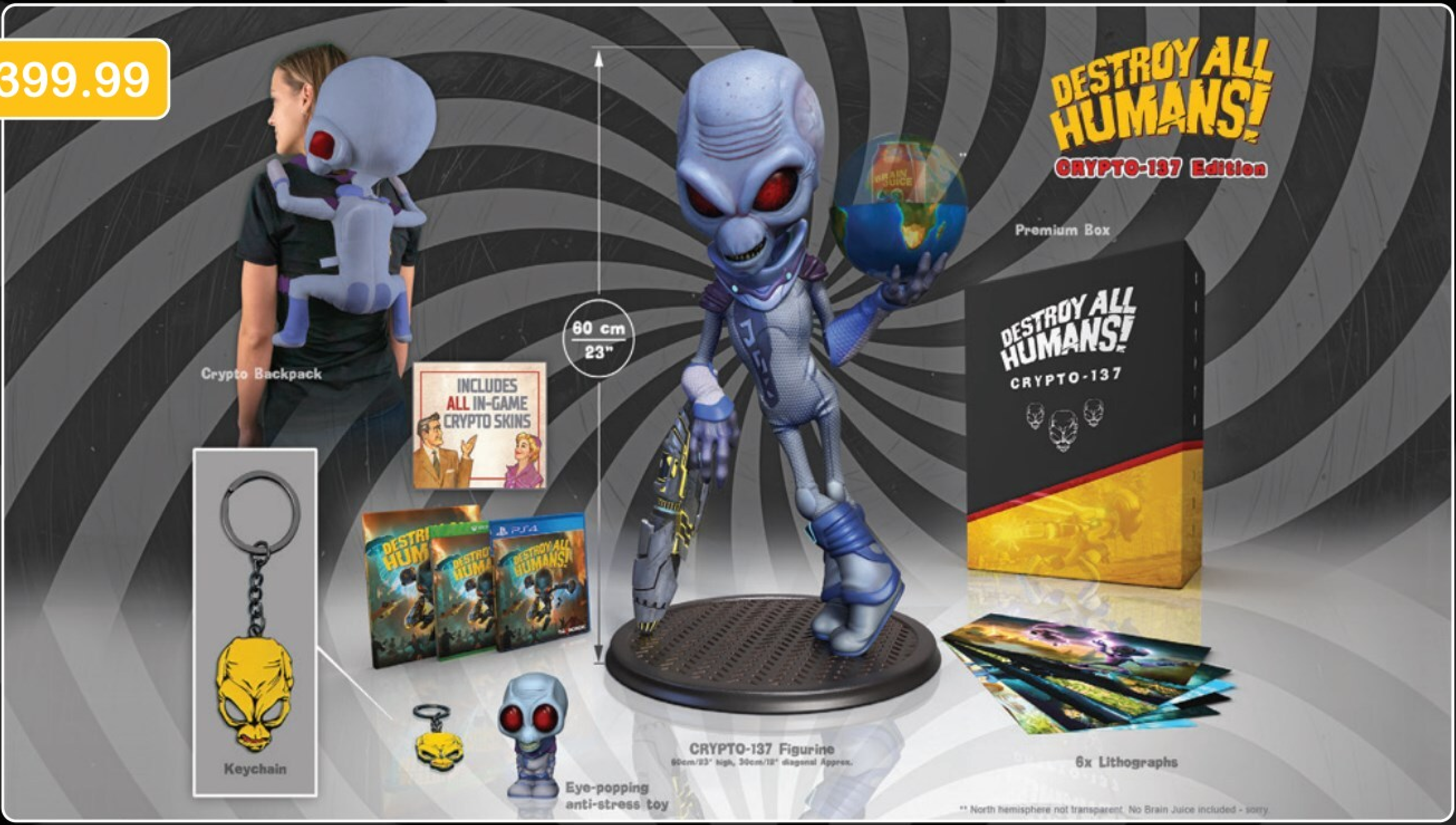
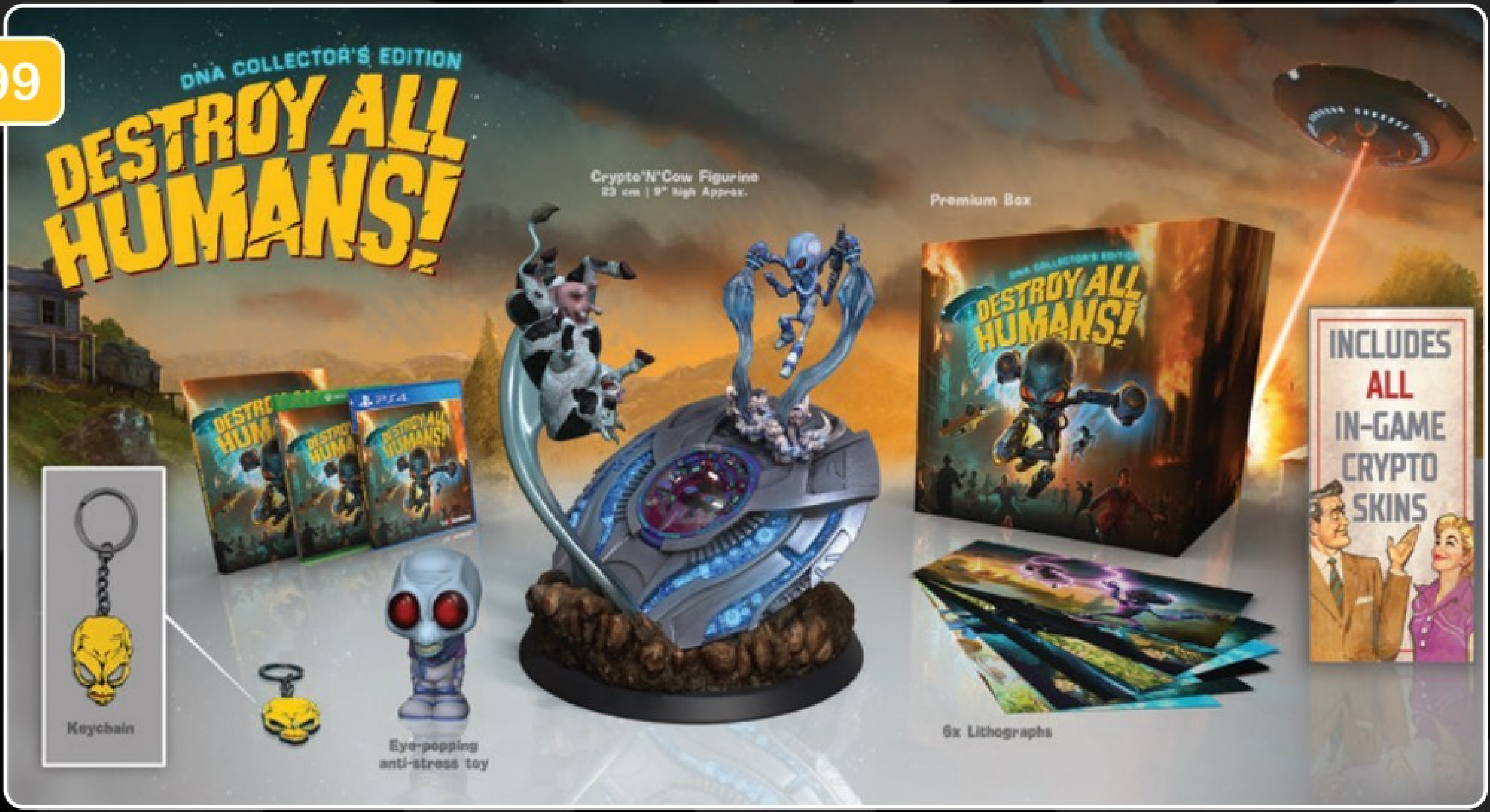
$399.99


DESTROY ALL HUMANS!
CRYPTO-137 Edition
Crypto Backpack
INCLUDES ALL IN-GAME CRYPTO SKINS
60 cm
23"
Premium Box
DESTROY ALL HUMANS!
CRYPTO-137
Keychain
CRYPTO-137 Figurine
60cm/23" high, 30cm/12" diagonal Approx.
Eye-popping anti-stress toy
6x Lithographs
** North hemisphere not transparent. No Brain Juice included - sorry

$149.99


DNA COLLECTOR'S EDITION
DESTROY ALL HUMANS!
Crypto'N'Cow Figurine
23 cm | 9" high Approx.
Premium Box
INCLUDES ALL IN-GAME CRYPTO SKINS
Keychain
Eye-popping anti-stress toy
6x Lithographs

$39.99

PS4
DESTROY ALL HUMANS!
THQ NORDIC

XBOX ONE
DESTROY ALL HUMANS!
THQ NORDIC

PC DVD
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TEEN
T
ESRB
Animated Blood
Crude Humor
Drug Reference
Language
Sexual Themes
Violence

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GameStop
POWER TO THE PLAYERS®

SURVIVING YOUR PERSONAL WASTELAND

Rounding up the best gear to keep you sane during insane times

by Ben Reeves

1

1 Witcher Notebook

Record all your survival tips and incoherent ramblings for future generations to find after you're gone in this sturdy notebook made from Washpapa eco paper and embossed with The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt logo. The book also includes four pages of descriptions and drawings of a harpy, complete with oil recipes for fighting hybrids. You'll thank us next time you run into one.

$40.00 | us.store.cdprojektred.com

2 Zombie Survival Battle Belt

Don't call this a fanny pack; it's survival gear! This replica of Leon S. Kennedy's battle belt from Resident Evil 2 gives you plenty of space to hold extra ammo, medical supplies, and – most importantly – snacks. Made from durable fabric, this replica measures about 40 inches long.

$186 | capcom-europe.com

2

RED DEAD REDEMPTION II
3

3 Red Dead Redemption 2 Brass Zippo Lighter

Fire is nearly as important to survival as food, so put that magic in your pocket with this rugged Zippo lighter, featuring gorgeously ornate detailing.

$44.99 | rockstarwarehouse.com

4 Boxing Bear Bomber Jacket

Just because the world is ending, that doesn't mean you should let your style slide. This official The Division jacket is a 60/40 cotton polyester fleece that will keep you warm wherever you bunker down for shelter at night.

$59.99 | merch.ubisoft.com

h2go
THE LAST OF US PART II
5

5 The Last of Us Part II Logo Water Bottle

Whether you're battling fungal mutants or walking the dog, staying hydrated is important. This double-wall, stainless-steel thermal bottle holds 40 ounces of liquid and keeps your favorite beverages cool for hours. ◆

$32.95 | gear.playstation.com

Media Shelf

THE ART OF THE LAST OF US PART II
DEATH STRANDING
EAST OF WEST
TEN

THE ART OF THE LAST OF US PART II

You might have to wait a bit longer than expected to play the sequel to Naughty Dog's post-apocalyptic masterpiece, but we can't stop you from ogling this collection of the game's original art, complete with creator commentary.

$39.99
darkhorse.com

DEATH STRANDING – SONGS FROM THE VIDEO GAME

Kojima Productions' game about a sprawling, disconnected world seems almost prophetic these days, but this collection of haunting, melodic music from artists like Low Roar, Chvrches, and Silent Poets might help you power on.

$39.99
kojimaproductions-store.com

EAST OF WEST – VOLUME 10

From acclaimed comics creators Jonathan Hickman and Nick Dragotta comes the epic conclusion to this sci-fi western set in a dystopian America where the Civil War never ended. And when the Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse begin to walk across the desert, the end of everything seems imminent.

$16.99
imagecomics.com

COLLECTIBLES FOR THE GAMING DEN

by Andrew Reiner

FUNKO POP! GAMING

The newest line of Funko Pop video game figures is a fun tour of some of the best games out there. The basic assortment consists of a gold version of Borderlands' Handsome Jack, Diablo's Tyrael, The Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim's Sheogorath, and a purple version of Fortnite's Skull Trooper. This line also includes a "super-sized" six-inch Pop of The Witcher III: Wild Hunt's Leshen.

(Basic) $11.99, (Super-Sized) $18.99 | gamestop.com*

*Full Disclosure: GameStop is the parent company of Game Informer

FINAL FANTASY VII REMAKE PLAY ARTS

Over the course of the year, Square Enix is releasing a highly detailed collection of Final Fantasy VII Remake action figures that fall within the toy manufacturer's popular Play Arts line. Cloud hits in August, Barret in October, Tifa in November, and Aerith in December. Each figure stands in at roughly 10 inches in height and is articulated to recreate specific poses from their game.

$154.99 each | square-enix.com

LEGO SUPER MARIO STARTER COURSE

Nintendo and Lego are teaming up for a Lego set that is quite different than any other to date. True to the Mario games, this Lego set is playable. As Mario is moved across the course, sensors pick up his movement, and he earns virtual coins. Mario will even emote via a speaker and LCD screens on his eyes, mouth, and stomach. The Starter Course is just the beginning; Lego is also releasing Piranha Plant Power Slide and Bowser's Castle Boss Battle expansion sets.

$59.99 | lego.com

CARBONIZED BOBA FETT BLACK SERIES

Last year, Hasbro introduced variant "Carbonized" versions of several of its six-inch Black Series action figures, and they sold out immediately. The next addition to this line is fan-favorite Boba Fett, who features new metallic paints and a shiny green box.

$24.99 | hasbropulse.com

PLAYING AT PANDEMIC

The new Pandemic: Hot Zone – North America is a gateway to thematic board games and an argument for teamwork in times of crisis

by Matt Miller

For people who've spent years exploring the various incarnations of the wildly popular Pandemic board game, the recent real-world health crisis may seem especially surreal. In that game, players work together as researchers, scientists, and doctors to overcome disease, attempting to control for outbreaks in individual cities while desperately searching for a cure. Unlike other cooperative games where you might face off against an encroaching horde of undead or a devastating monster from beyond space and time, Pandemic's antagonist is the faceless threat of illness. So, if players find the eerie comparisons to the current situation strange, just imagine how the designer feels.

"Pandemics used to be this theoretical thing for me," says Matt Leacock, designer of the original Pandemic, and returning designer for the brand-new Pandemic: Hot Zone – North America. "I thought they might happen somewhere, sometime, but that was always 'somewhere else' in my mind. Then COVID-19 struck. Our family was affected fairly early on. My wife, Donna, was infected in February and has only recently recovered, and the whole experience became quite real."

The original Pandemic is regularly cited as a great entry point into hobby board games, thanks to its understandable rules, familiar concept, and a fully cooperative nature that allows more experienced players to help everyone get up to speed. But with years of iteration on the concept, Leacock found that the game might be even more accessible with some additional adjustments. Originally, publisher Z-Man Games wanted a demo version of Pandemic – something stores could use to introduce the game to new players. "I created a prototype and it worked well enough that we immediately began talking about making it into a full product," Leacock says. "It looked like it could fill a new niche in the line – it was faster to set up, played in half the time, and could sell at about half the cost – while maintaining all of the tension of the original."

The final result is Hot Zone, and after playing this new version, its appeal is clear. While I still love the original game for longer sessions, Hot Zone could more easily fit in at a family get-together with all ages and experience levels. The gameplay feels tighter, with a single-continent focus and only 24 cities (exactly half of the original), as well as fewer diseases to confront in a single session. Available actions have been scaled back, so there are fewer core options to grasp. The board is smaller, accommodating tighter play spaces. And new "crisis" cards still allow for scaling difficulty, able to be added as your team learns the game, and as they are ready for a bigger challenge. Taken together, Hot Zone plays fast and needs limited explanation, but still maintains the sense of teamwork and carefully balanced challenge that has always characterized the franchise.

When I asked about this new game's release in the midst of a worldwide lockdown, Leacock spoke about his wish that it could be a way to come together and have a good time. "Over and above that, I'd hope that it could help them process what's going on," Leacock says. Some people have even reported it gives them a sense of empowerment over the disease. Along the way, I also hope it might reshape their understanding that games don't have to be competitive to be fun, and perhaps they could carry that outlook into the real world. As humans, we cooperate so much more than people realize, and that spirit serves us well, especially in the situation we find ourselves in today."

Pandemic: Hot Zone – North America is planned as the first in a series, with future releases transplanting the concept to other regions around the globe, albeit with some new twists in each setting. Meanwhile, more dedicated hobbyists needn't worry that the franchise is only moving toward streamlining. The spin-off Pandemic Legacy series, in which the events of one session carry their consequences into the next, has its third installment on the way before the end of the year.

In the meantime, this refined and simplified take on Pandemic is planned for rollout this summer, and can hopefully offer families, partners, and friends who are stuck at home a chance to have some fun. "The real world is far more complex, but like the game, we all do have to work together in order to defeat the disease," Leacock says. "I think the theme of working together to defeat a disease that threatens humanity is quite fitting for our current situation."

©2020 Z-Man Games

TurboGrafx 16
TurboPad
TurboGrafx 16
II
I
Select
Run

HARDWARE REVIEW

TURBOGRAFX-16 MINI

by Jeff Cork

NEC's swing at entering the console market may not have connected with Western audiences, but the TurboGrafx-16 remains an interesting relic of the late '80s. Despite beating the Genesis to market in Japan, being the first system with a CD-ROM attachment, and having a portable counterpart that played console software, the TurboGrafx-16 ended up an also-ran in the 16-bit battle. And that's a shame, really. It was home to some great software, with an enviable lineup of arcade shooters and standouts like Castlevania: Rondo of Blood and the Bonk series. Players who never played the system now have a great option with the release of the TurboGrafx-16 Mini, a downsized version of the console with a large library of retro games.

WHAT'S IN THE BOX?

The TurboGrafx-16 Mini follows the lead established with other mini consoles out there. The box is designed to match the original hardware, with the same graphic design you would have seen if you'd picked it up back in 1989. Inside, you get the mini console, a USB controller, an HDMI cable, and a USB power cable. You have to supply your own AC plug, since it's literally just the power cable. That's nothing new for electronics, but it's still disappointing.

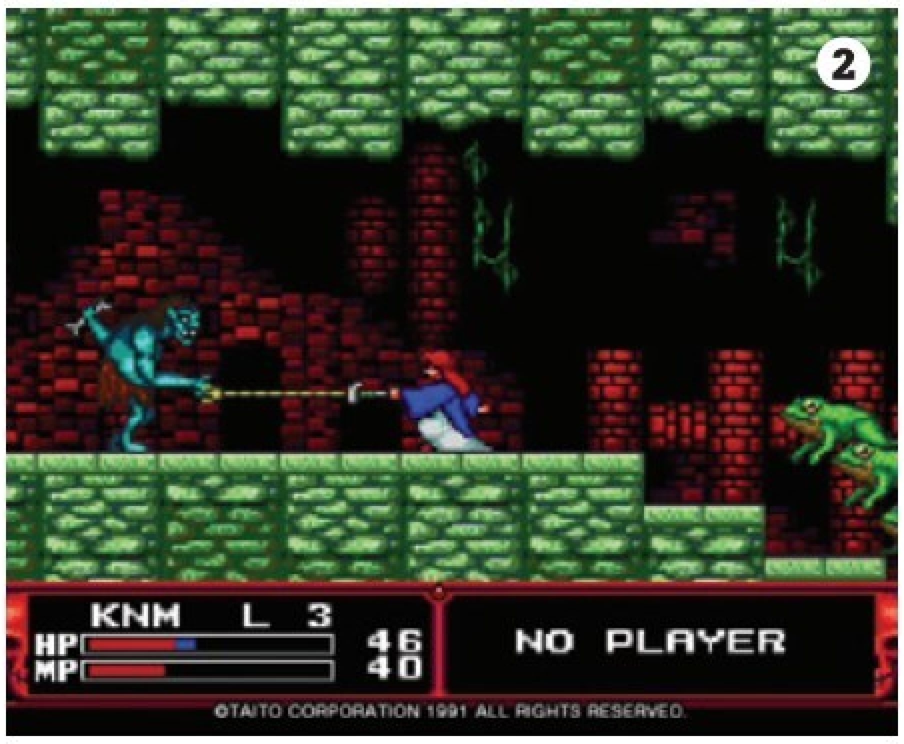
The console itself is fairly large, nearly double the size of the NES Classic. It's a faithful recreation of the original hardware, down to the large removable back cover, which originally hid the system's expansion port. Here, it lets you thread the video and power cables through the back. It's a cute touch, though I ended up just keeping it off. The controller is similarly faithful, featuring the distinctive adjustable rapid-fire buttons for the I and II buttons. The controller cable is generous, at nearly 10 feet in length. You also get a bare-bones instruction manual, in case you need help setting it up. It's really as simple as plugging it into your TV via HDMI and powering it on, however.

You only get one controller in the box, but you can purchase extras for $24.99 each. You can also pick up a Turbo Tap adapter for $29.99, which lets you connect five more controllers to the system. As you might imagine, supporting a full crew for some Bomberman is a pricey proposition, but it's an option if you're so inclined.

THE PRESENTATION

Once you plug it in, you're greeted with an attractive game-selection menu accompanied by peppy music. Each title is represented by its original North American cover art, which includes some truly tragic artistic decisions. Oddly enough, the original art for New Adventure Island is replaced with text over a plain background. The game is still fun (regardless of how it's presented in menus), but this decision breaks up a generally consistent presentation.

The usual retro console bells and whistles are present, as well. You can choose from a variety of aspect ratios, and also enable a filter that simulates a CRT display. My favorite is a frame that simulates playing games on a TurboExpress handheld, complete with a filter that does a solid job of recreating its LCD screen. While playing games, you can access a system menu by pressing the select and run buttons simultaneously. Here, you can save and load your progress in one of four slots for each game, reset the game, or return to the system menu. The only time you need to interact with the mini console itself is by powering it on or shutting it off.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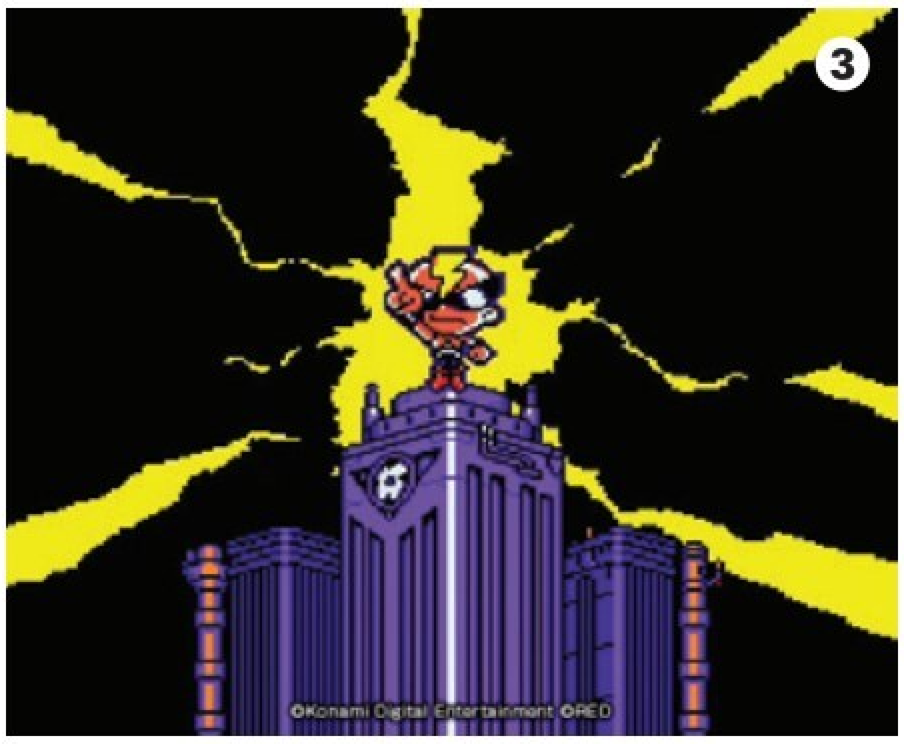
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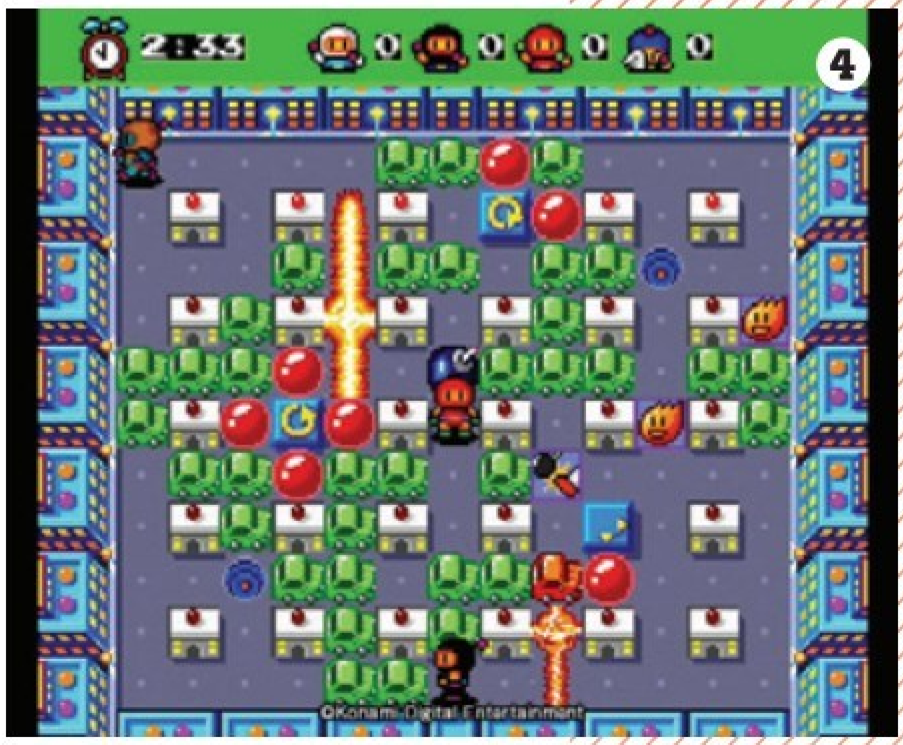
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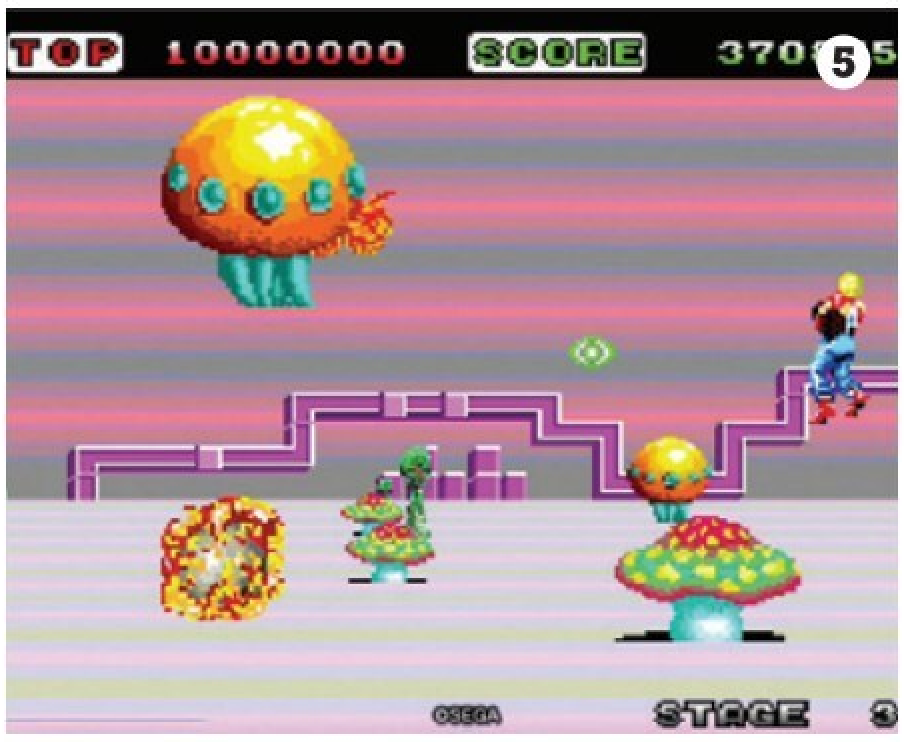
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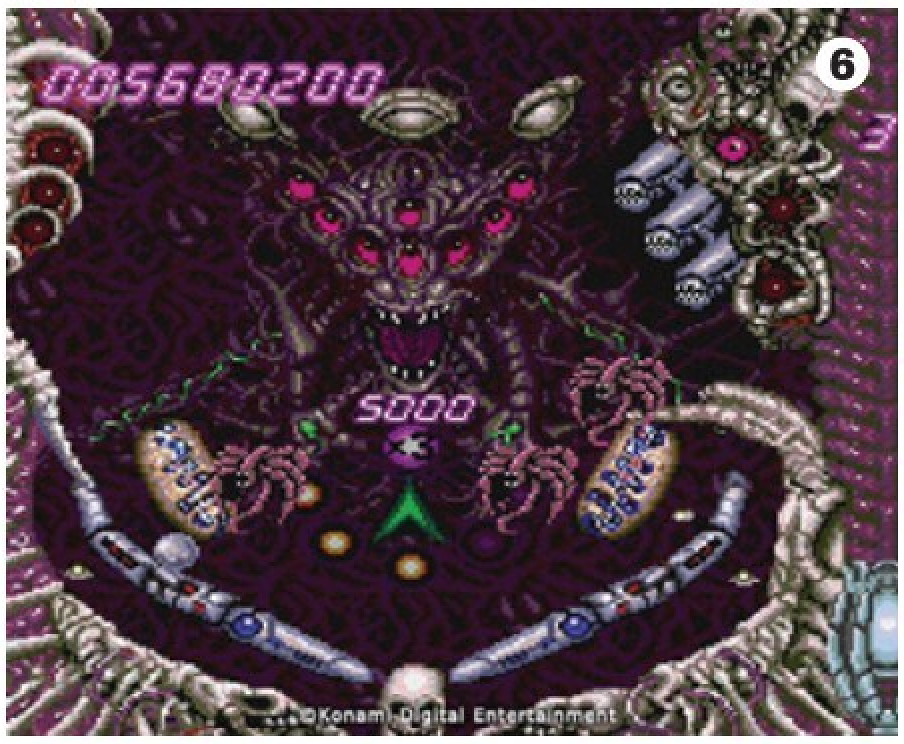
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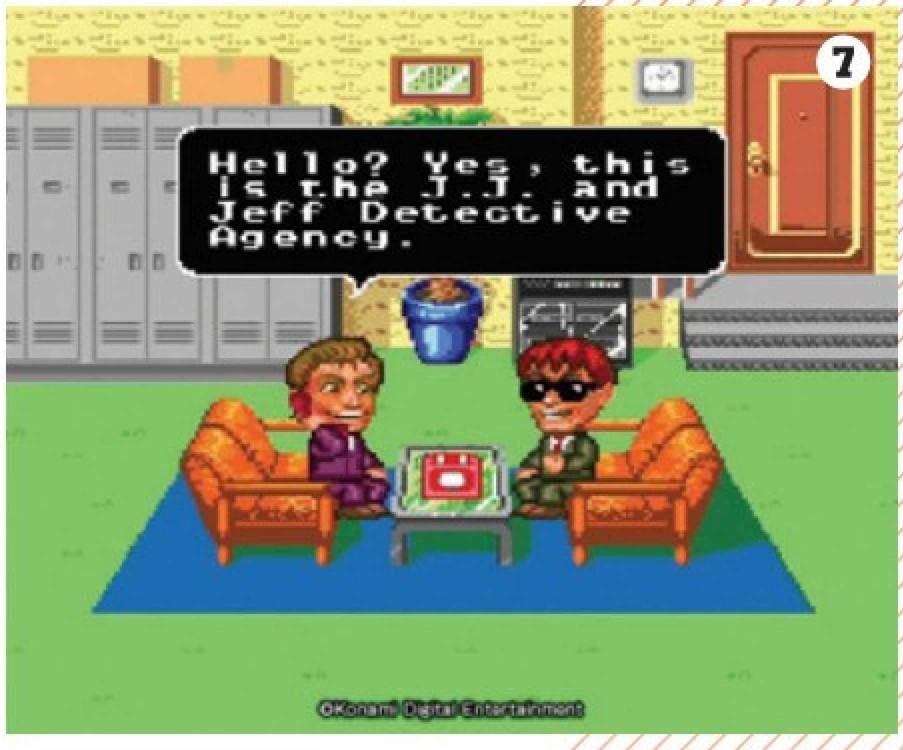
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Hello? Yes, this is the J.J. and Jeff Detective Agency.

THE GAMES

The TurboGrafx-16 Mini includes 57 games, which is one of the beefier rosters we've seen in these mini consoles. That number is split into two libraries: 25 of the games are North American TurboGrafx-16 releases, and the remaining 32 are from its Japanese counterpart, the PC Engine. You navigate between those libraries in the main menu. It makes sense, but it also adds an unnecessary extra step when you're bouncing between games.

When I say they're the Japanese releases, that's exactly what I mean. The games aren't localized in any way; you get the same experience you would have had you imported the games back then. Games like Gradius II or Bomberman don't lose much in the translation, but it's something you should be forewarned about if you saw this as an opportunity to play Hideo Kojima's Snatcher. Unless you're fluent in Japanese, the dialogue-heavy titles require access to a translation guide or a patient bilingual friend.

With that caveat out of the way, this is a great selection of games. Unlike some of the other retro games out there, many of these have either been hard to track down or would have been cost prohibitive to pick up on a game-by-game basis. Unless you had the foresight to download these when the Wii's Virtual Console was still around, you may not have had a chance to play things like Air Zonk or Blazing Lazers – games that absolutely deserve your attention.

THE VERDICT

The TurboGrafx-16 Mini is a great collection of games, and a glimpse at a console that never really had a chance. Several clunkers are on the roster, but even those are never boring. I probably never would have played the Japanese game The Kung Fu if not for the mini, which meant I would have missed a hilariously inept attempt at a side-scrolling fighting game. I had a great time laughing at its awkward enemies and animations, and recycled boss battles. On the flip side, a lot of hidden gems are in the collection. In particular, the selection of 2D shooters is unparalleled. If that's a genre that appeals to you, this is probably going to be the best $99 you'll ever spend.

VERY GOOD ■■■■■■■■□□

$99.99 | konami.com

The Complete Lineup

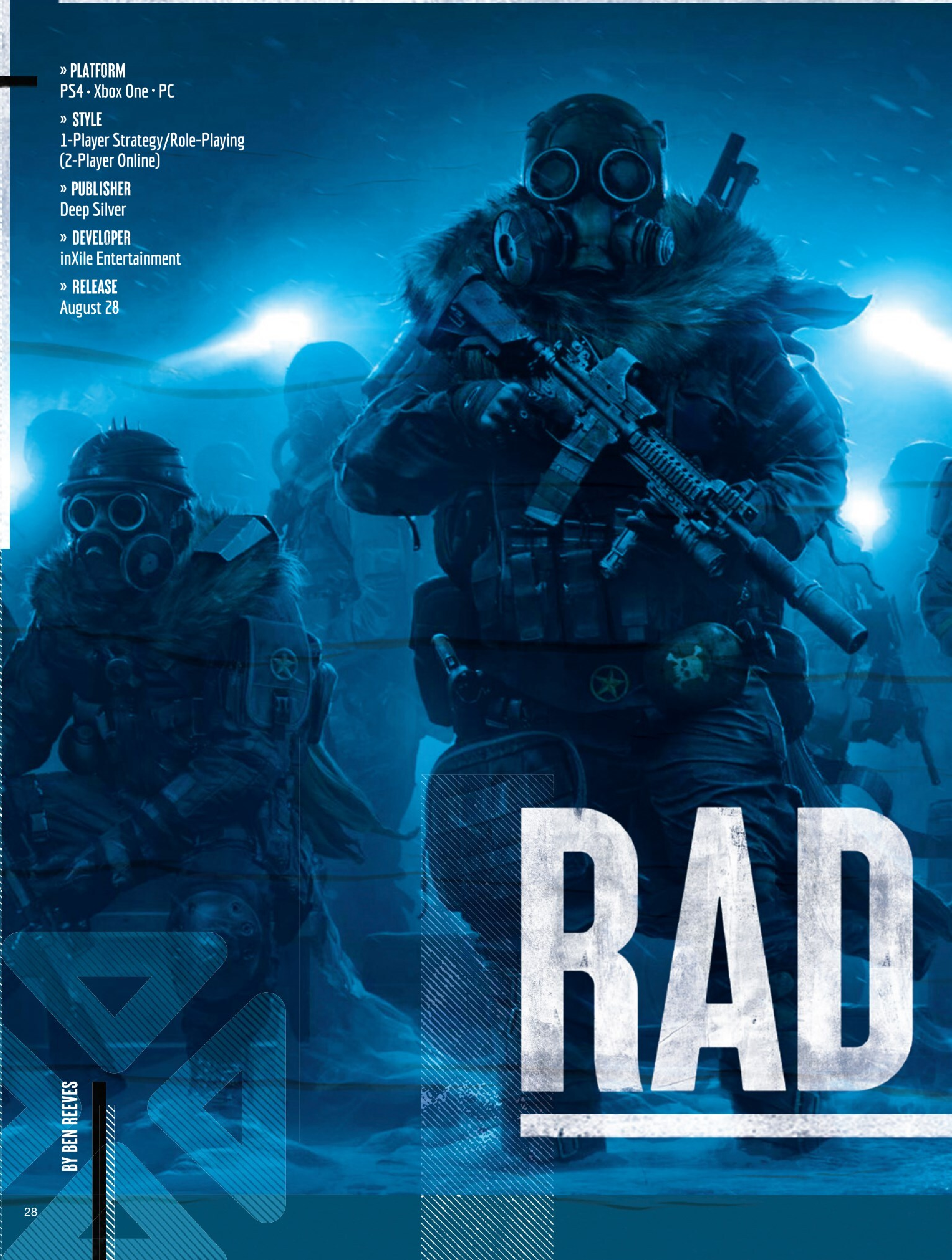
It's easy to look at a list of games and dwell on what isn't included, but overall the selection is remarkable, both in scope and variety. Here's the complete list of titles:

North American TurboGrafx-16 Games:

- Air Zonk ③
- Alien Crush ⑥
- Blazing Lazers ①
- Bomberman '93 ④
- Bonk's Revenge
- Cadash ②
- Chew Man Fu
- Dungeon Explorer
- J.J. & Jeff ⑦
- Lords of Thunder
- Military Madness
- Moto Roader
- Neutopia
- Neutopia II
- New Adventure Island
- Ninja Spirit
- Parasol Stars
- Power Golf
- Psychosis
- R-Type
- Soldier Blade
- Space Harrier ⑤
- Splatterhouse
- Victory Run
- Ys Book I & II

Japanese PC-Engine games:

- Akumajo Dracula X Chi no Rondo (Castlevania: Rondo of Blood)
- Aldynes
- Appare! Gateball
- Bomberman '94
- Bomberman: Panic Bomber
- Cho Aniki
- Daimakaimura (Ghouls 'n Ghosts)
- Dragon Spirit
- Dungeon Explorer
- Fantasy Zone
- Galaga '88
- The Genji and the Heike Clans
- Ginga Fukei Densetsu Sapphire
- Gradius
- Gradius II - Gofer no Yabo
- Jaseiken Necromancer
- The Kung Fu (China Warrior)
- Nectaris (Military Madness)
- Neutopia
- Neutopia II
- Ninja Ryukenden (Ninja Gaiden)
- PC Genjin (Bonk's Adventure)
- Salamander
- Snatcher
- Seirei Senshi Spriggan
- Spriggan Mark 2: Re-Terraform Project
- Star Parodier
- Super Darius
- Super Momotaro Dentetsu II
- Super Star Soldier
- Valkyrie no Densetsu
- Ys I & II



» PLATFORM
PS4 • Xbox One • PC

» STYLE
1-Player Strategy/Role-Playing
(2-Player Online)

» PUBLISHER
Deep Silver

» DEVELOPER
inXile Entertainment

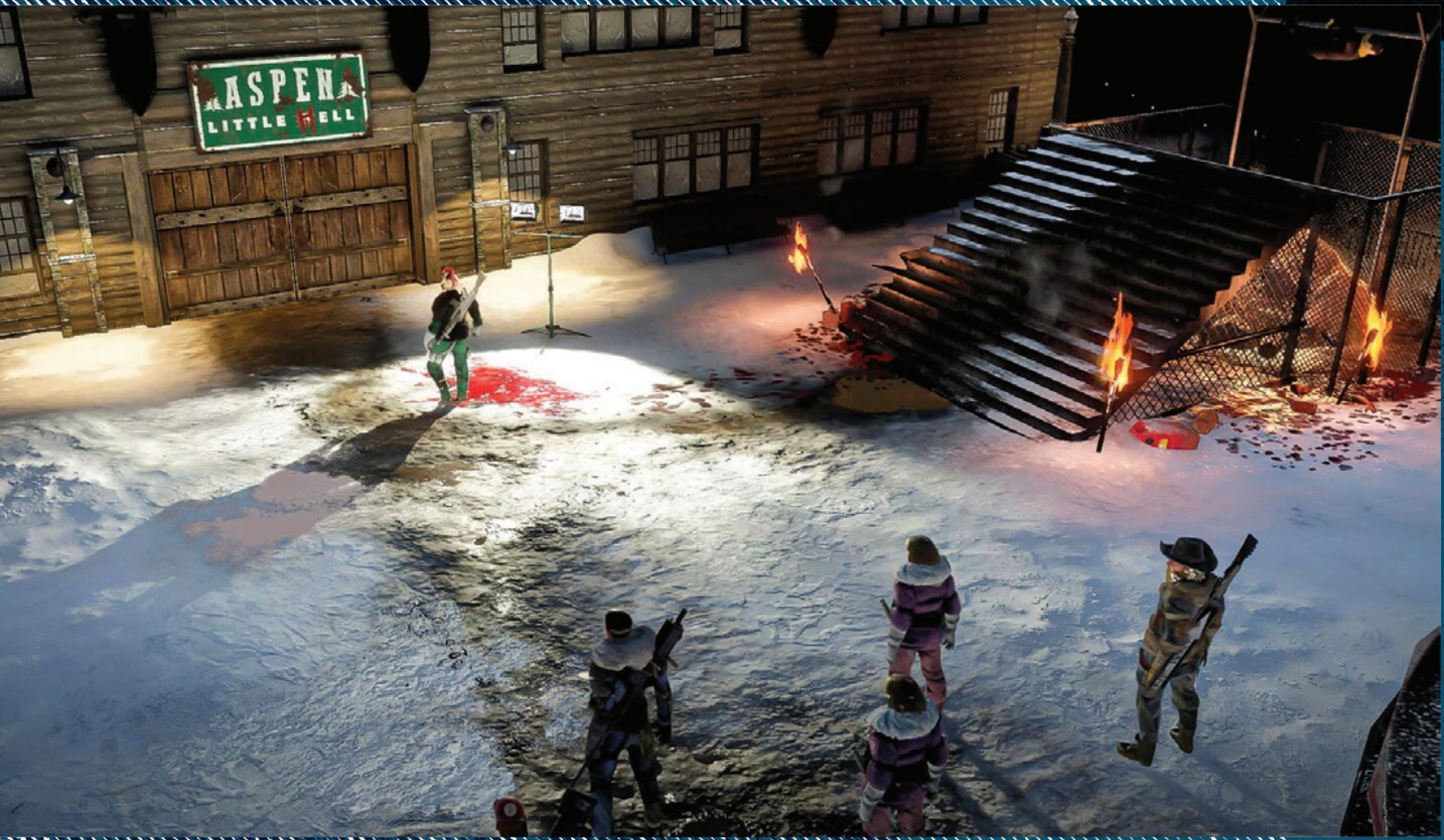
» RELEASE
August 28

RAD

BY BEN REEVES

For over three decades, the Wasteland series has let fans explore reactive, living worlds, but **WASTELAND 3** takes the series to new heights

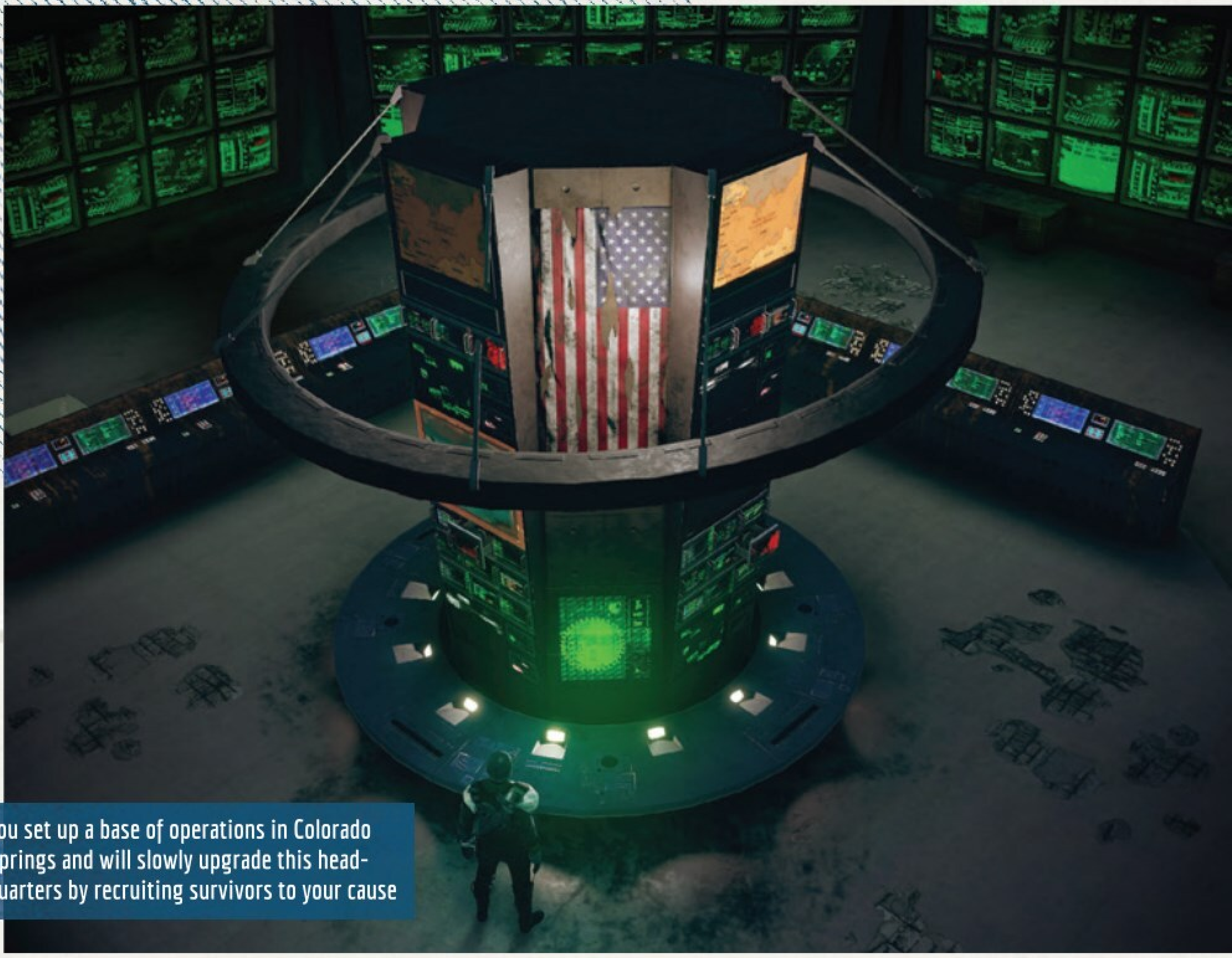
COLD.
MEAN.
IOACTIVE.



NO ONE REMEMBERS HOW THE WORLD ENDED.

Even our elders aren't old enough to have seen the fire that fell from the sky. But the stories from the old world are our cultural memory. These tales tell of a time when humanity unlocked the secrets of the atom and then used that esoteric knowledge to wage war against itself. According to the stories, the once-mighty nations of the United States and the Soviet Union were locked in a cold war that suddenly turned hot and melted the surface of our planet. That was a century ago, and the world has done the only thing it knows to do in the face of a catastrophe: continued to turn.

Once the radioactive dust settled, a group of army engineers in Arizona formed the Desert Rangers. This group of battle-tested legionnaires committed themselves to helping humanity and bringing order back to a lawless desert. Then one day, we received a mysterious radio message from the self-proclaimed leader of the defunct state of Colorado. His voice was strong and assured, and he promised to restock our dwindling resources in return for aid. We knew the journey across states would be hard, but we had no idea of the tragedies ahead. In ignorance, we packed our bags and marched forward into an unknown, frozen wasteland.



You set up a base of operations in Colorado Springs and will slowly upgrade this headquarters by recruiting survivors to your cause

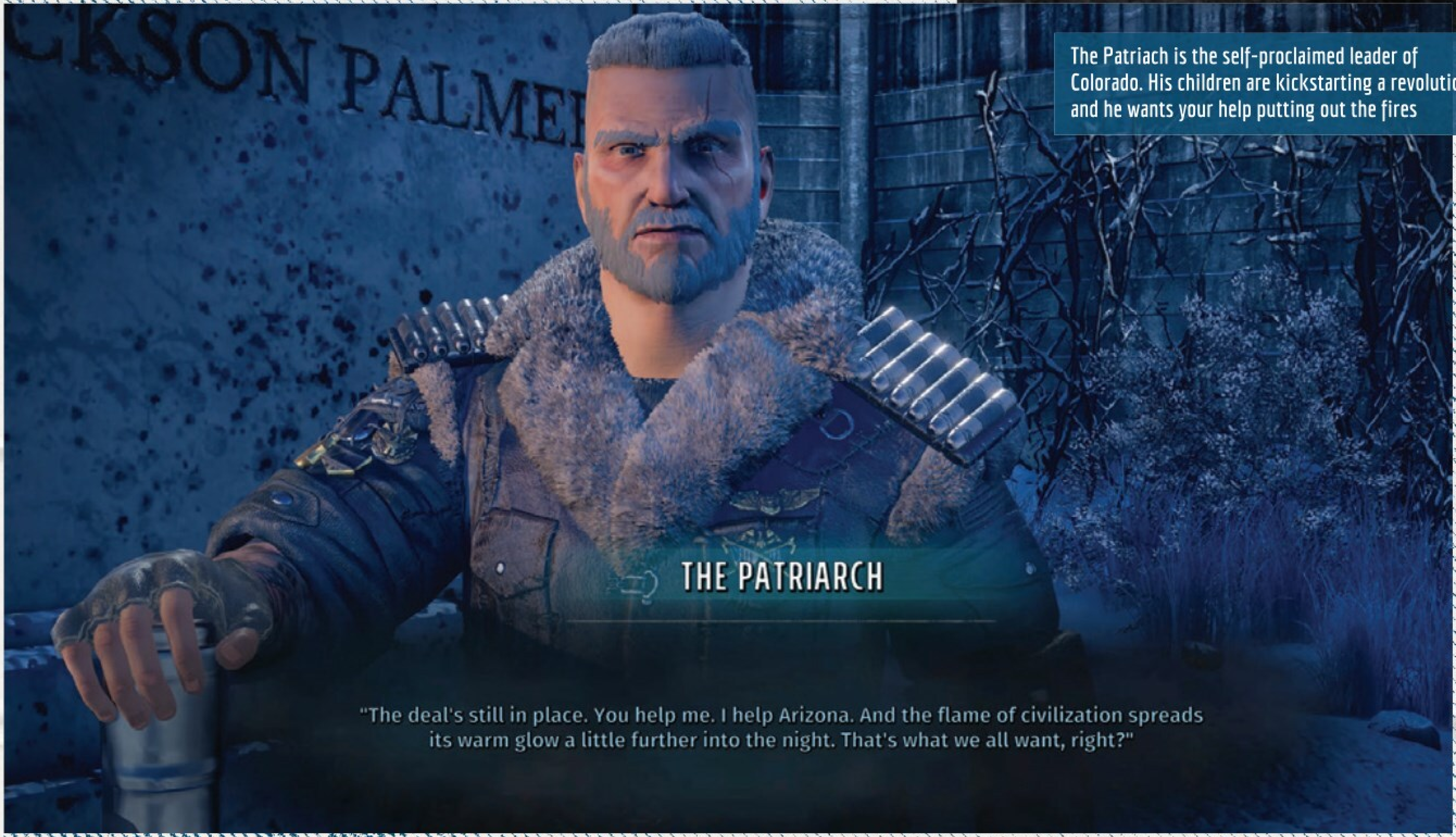
ENTERING THE WASTELAND

Brian Fargo knew he wanted to start his own company the day a game-publishing meeting devolved into a fistfight. Fargo had always been a bit of an entrepreneur. As a kid, he collected golf balls and sold them to frugal golfers. At the age of 18, he self-published his first computer game, taking ads out in gaming magazines to spread the word. Then, in 1982, a local game company called Boone Corporation offered him a job as their VP of development. Fargo thought it was a dream come true.

"I was really just a kid, and they were all graduates of Stanford," Fargo recalls. "They all had their diplomas on the wall. They were supposed to be the adults in the room, but there was also a lot of bickering with these guys. One day, we're in a tiny, little room, and the CEO said something. Then the vice president of operations leaped across the table and started choking him. I was like, 'Holy moly!' Imagine me, I'm just a kid, and he was a Stanford linebacker … That was the first person I ever had to fire in my entire life, and it was the worst because he insisted that we go to his house and tell him in person while his crying wife opened the door."

Fargo believed there was a better way to make games, and his conviction was wider-reaching than fixing the obvious HR violations. Most games of the era were designed by one- or two-person teams, and those "game makers" were all programmers. The industry was incredibly short on writers, artists, and system designers. Still, Fargo believed that if someone could bring together specialists with varying disciplines, their combined talents would be greater than the sum of their parts, and the games they made could change the course of the industry. A collective of developers might even be able to make games that felt like living worlds. So, at the age of 20, Fargo took a bold step and founded Interplay Productions.

In 1985, Interplay found early success with Tales of the Unknown Volume 1: The Bard's Tale, a fantasy-themed role-playing game about a ragtag group of freedom fighters on a quest to bring an evil wizard to justice. The Bard's Tale became a number one bestseller and was praised for its unprecedented use of 3D graphics and slickly animated character portraits. The title spawned a number of sequels and became one of the most iconic computer games of the mid-'80s, but Fargo had grander ambitions. He appreciated high fantasy, but his real love was post-apocalyptic fiction as seen in films like *Mad Max* or novels like *Swan Song* by Robert R. McCammon. Fargo felt that if he took the design concepts from The Bard's Tale and applied them to a post-apocalyptic world, his company would have another giant hit on its hands.



The Patriach is the self-proclaimed leader of Colorado. His children are kickstarting a revolution and he wants your help putting out the fires

THE PATRIARCH

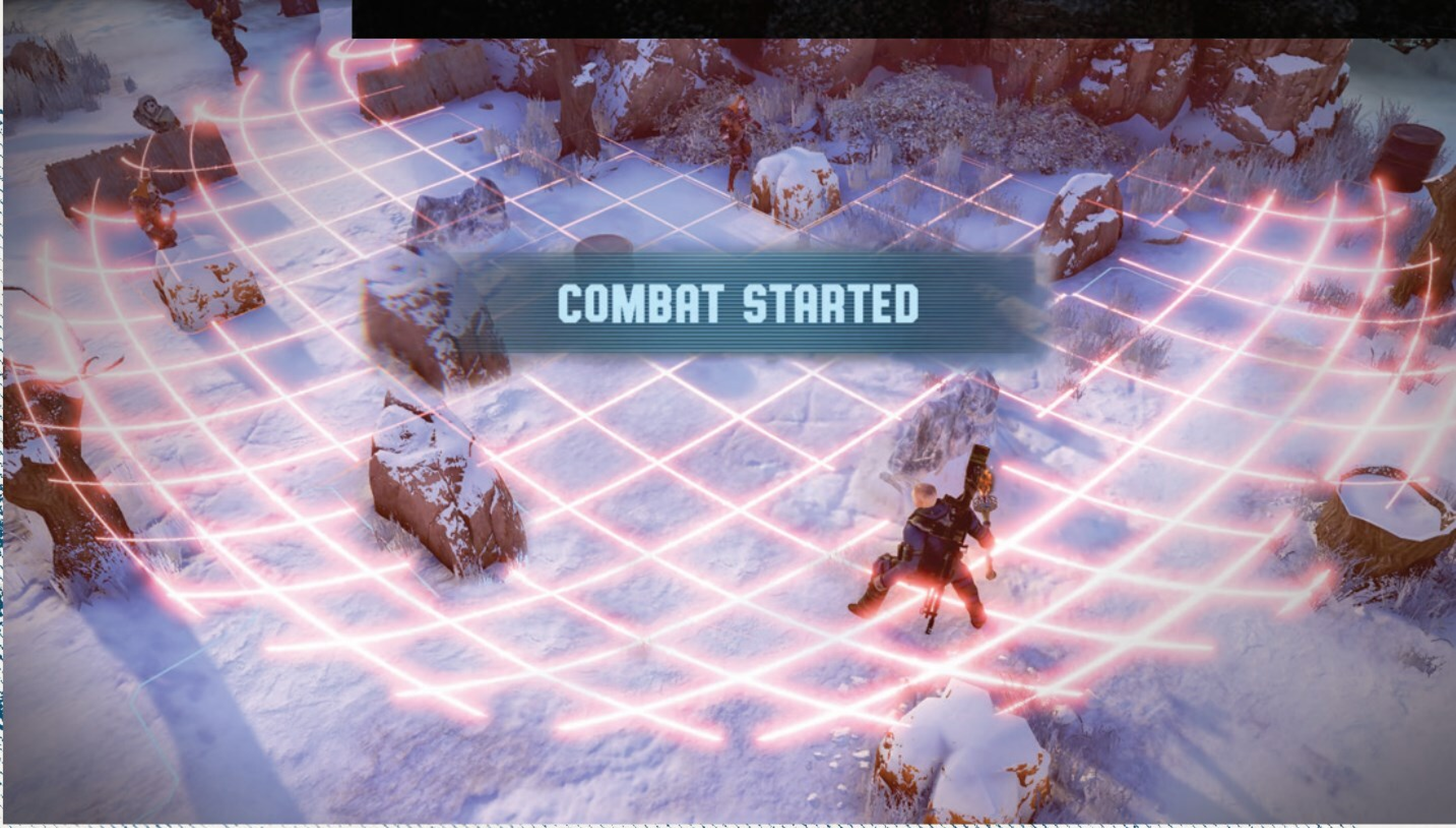
"The deal's still in place. You help me. I help Arizona. And the flame of civilization spreads its warm glow a little further into the night. That's what we all want, right?"

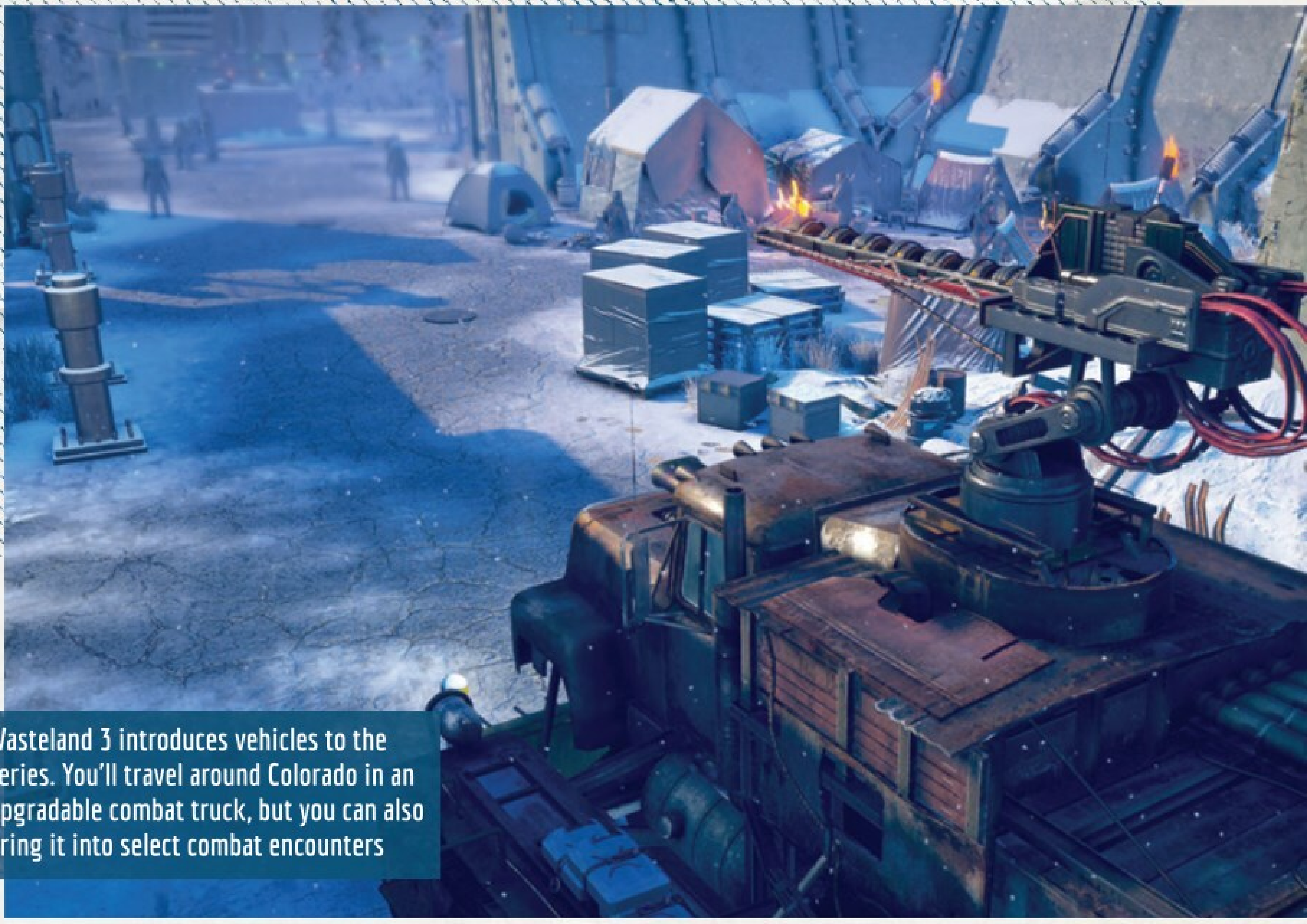
"I wanted to do something that wasn't magic-based," Fargo says. "I was looking for a system that could represent items that people understood and knew – like if you pick up a shotgun, or a rifle, or a lockpick, you immediately know what that is and what to do with it. That's when I stumbled upon [the tabletop RPG] Mercenaries, Spies and Private Eyes. I got all the talent that worked on that, which was a great find because they were mostly writers, so they brought a very writer-oriented approach to the game … My roots were mostly with the hacking community, frankly. That's where all the talented programmers were, so I made deals and hired all the local hackers to do our game."

Fargo wasn't content to rush this new post-apocalyptic project to store shelves; he wanted to take the time to perfect it and make it feel like a living world. Most RPGs from the '80s were class-based, meaning players created characters from pre-made archetypes like fighter, wizard, or rogue and then worked within those pre-defined roles. In Wasteland, players wouldn't be constrained by their early choices; they would have the freedom to shape their heroes however they pleased. Wasteland's world would also be incredibly reactive. While NPCs in other RPGs might spout off a few random lines of dialogue, Wasteland's characters reacted believably to players' actions. If a player stole an item from another character, that character would get angry. If your heroes killed a kid's dog, that child would be so distraught that they might attack you. Wasteland even remembered your choices from one play session to the next, which was almost unheard of at the time.

"Those tools were non-existent," Fargo says. "There was all this great cause-and-effect and reactivity in the original Wasteland, but that's because each square that the player stepped on was like a program. We had to run a little program for every square you crossed, it was a real pain. And we had to create multiple save discs. When people played the game, they had to constantly swap the discs in and out of their computers, which was much more intensive than what people were used to. You might remember that there was a paragraph book full of story details, and that's because we ran out of space on those discs."

When Wasteland finally released in 1988, it was a critical hit and sold over 100,000 copies, which was an impressive number for the era. However, that did not necessarily translate to blockbuster financial success. The Wasteland team had grown to include 12 people, and development had stretched on for nearly four years. In a decade when most computer games were completed in 9 to 12 months, Wasteland's development costs were expensive. Wasteland's publisher, EA Games, was hesitant to commit to a sequel, but Fargo wasn't ready to let Wasteland slowly fade into history. He knew he was going to get another crack at the franchise – even if it took decades and he had to build a new company from scratch. Fargo had no idea the journey Wasteland was about to take him on.





Wasteland 3 introduces vehicles to the series. You'll travel around Colorado in an upgradable combat truck, but you can also bring it into select combat encounters

THE FROZEN BADLANDS

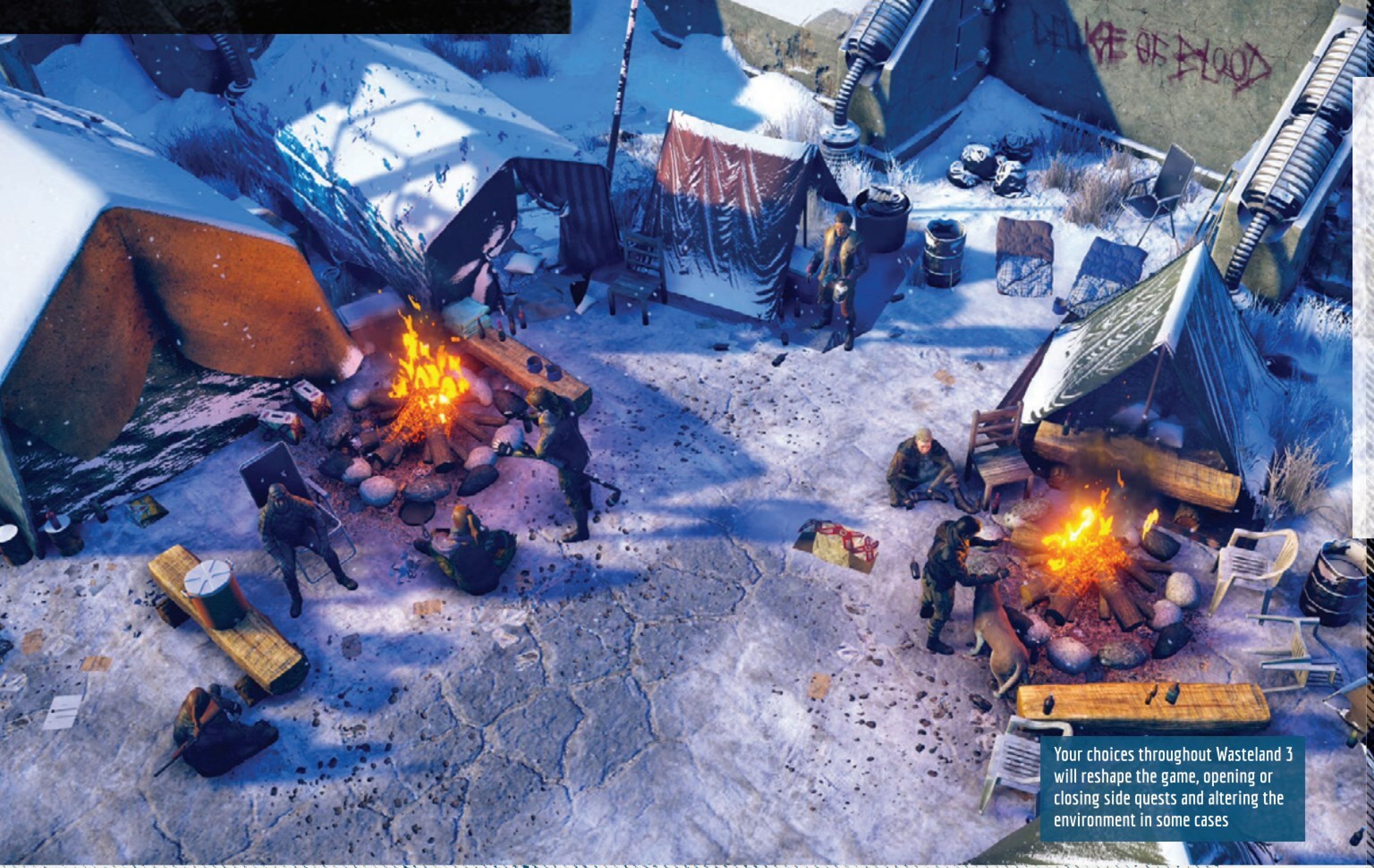
Our journey felt impossibly long, but my Rangers finally made it to Colorado. A man called The Patriarch filled our ears with a lot of promises, but before he'll shower us with riches, he wants our help bringing his wayward children back in line. One of his sons, a lunatic named Victory Buchanan, is holed up in a ski lodge in the resort town of Aspen. Unfortunately, Vic has turned Aspen into a personal fortress, and he has somehow corralled a small army for protection.

"Vic is just bats--- insane," says lead designer David Rogers. "He's kind of the black sheep of the entire family … He's essentially used his insane charisma and sadistic ways to hook an entire culture of people on a drug that keeps them subordinate, and he's convinced them that he is more or less a deity. So, he has an entire cult of these drug-addled fiends, and they don't really know what they're doing, but he's put himself up on the throne of Aspen."

I'm here to knock that crown off Vic's head and send him back to daddy, but in order to infiltrate his ski lodge I need to power a drawbridge that will allow me to cross the chasm separating my crew from Vic's mountain home. My gang of Rangers begins scouting a nearby maintenance facility. Unfortunately, the building is crawling with vagabonds, and the assault rifles at their hips tell me they aren't wandering merchants.

As in Wasteland 2, combat in Wasteland 3 plays out across a series of turn-based tactical firefights. However, unlike Wasteland 2, your heroes now share a turn order, meaning you can issue attack commands to all your characters simultaneously. Since you can manage teams of up to six Rangers, this gives you plenty of opportunities to play your heroes off each other. This system also allows inXile to design character perks and special attacks that create nice combos.

"There's a broader range of ways to build your characters," says game director Tim Campbell. "For example, there's a perk called serial killer. As you kill an enemy in combat, it gives you additional action points. There's also a leadership skill that benefits your party when you pull off heroic actions in combat. So, one of my favorite builds is a very charismatic serial-killer leader. The rest of my team basically tries to set him up by almost killing enemies, and then this guy comes in and does the finishing blow, which rewards him with more action points to get another finishing blow, which rewards more action points, on down the line."



Your choices throughout Wasteland 3 will reshape the game, opening or closing side quests and altering the environment in some cases

I deliver my own coordinated assault when I get the jump on a few demented, parka-wearing mercs. To start, I have one Ranger toss a cryo grenade at three enemies, which reduces their available action points. That should buy my sniper some time to get into position and take them out. Another Ranger uses a "spot" ability to tag enemies, making critical hits against them more likely. Finally, my melee attacker rushes forward. One of his perks gives him a free attack whenever he hits a character twice with a bladed weapon, which is enough to knock a few grunts out of the fight for good. Managing all of my characters' perks and abilities is a lot to digest at first, but this wealth of options lends Wasteland 3's combat a real sense of depth.

Not every element of my attack goes off without a hitch. Somewhere along the way I picked up a balding hillbilly named Scotchmo. Series fans actually helped create this character during Wasteland 2's development, and inXile loved the character so much they brought him back for Wasteland 3. This hayseed has a unique quirk – he's an alcoholic, which comes with a few complications. Any member of your party is free to use drugs and alcohol. These vices actually offer buffs during combat, but characters can also develop addictions to these substances, which gives them massive hit penalties whenever those effects wear off. Meaning, you either have to feed their addiction or find a way to rehabilitate your characters.

However, substance abuse is the least of my worries at the moment. In the middle of my fight, Scotchmo starts acting of his own volition, which can happen if your characters don't trust your leadership. Before I have the chance to say otherwise, Scotchmo downs an entire bottle of whiskey and charges headfirst into battle. Scotchmo takes out two enemies with a wide shotgun spread, but he also clips my melee hero in the process, which makes him a real wild card. I'll have to keep my eye on him going forward.

"We leverage every single skill in the game someplace in the combat," Campbell says. "If you are high on survival or mechanics or however you've built your party, that will open up new options in combat. Whether it's a survivalist who befriends animals and brings them into battle or a mechanic who powers down guns and reprograms robots, it all helps. If you are really good at melee combat, you can even make fun of someone's knife, which could affect combat."

After I've laid waste to a couple sets of goons, I power up the drawbridge, which gives me access to Vic's hideout. I'm ready to storm the gates of Aspen. However, I might want to rethink my strategy of shooting first and asking questions later. Some of Wasteland 3's biggest problems are best solved with your wits.

FINDING HUMOR IN HORROR

The world of Wasteland 3 is full of thieves, murderers, and cannibals, but inXile doesn't want you to feel deflated while playing the game. Despite its dark tone, the Wasteland franchise has always had an offbeat sense of humor. For example, in addition to skills like bartering and heavy weapons, your characters can level up their ability to repair toasters. As this implies, your heroes can fix broken toasters scattered around the world, which reward you with random loot.

"Wasteland is dark, but it's so goofy," says lead designer David Rogers. "I find that to be really important because it kind of keeps you moving forward in what could otherwise be a super grim game. That kind of palate cleanser is super important for you to be able to sit down and play this game for hours and hours on end. If your play session was just six hours of straight sadness, it would be a real bummer, so we see humor as an important element of the game."

KICKSTARTING AN APOCALYPSE

Brian Fargo was at his wit's end. He'd tried for nearly a decade to convince EA that Wasteland deserved a sequel, but EA wasn't interested. By the late-'90s, Fargo decided that he didn't need EA to create a post-apocalyptic RPG. He could just create a spiritual sequel that used Wasteland's DNA to craft a similar post-apocalyptic survival experience. This new wasteland game became Fallout.

Fallout has grown into a massive franchise, but the first two games were only moderate successes for Interplay. One of the company's biggest hits of the '90s was Baldur's Gate, which Fargo had overseen while working with a group of RPG fanatics in Edmonton called BioWare. In fact, BioWare's meteoric rise in the world of RPG developers underscored Fargo's real talent for finding talent. Over the years, Fargo kickstarted the careers of a number of notable industry giants. In the early '90s, he helped three graduates from the University of California publish Rock n' Roll Racing. Those developers later rebranded under the name Blizzard Entertainment. Years later, Fargo greenlit a game called Die by the Sword from a young company called Treyarch, who would eventually achieve great fame with the Call of Duty: Black Ops franchise. Interplay's own internal-development arm, Black Isle Studios, was full of developers who went on to found Obsidian Entertainment and make games like Pillars of Eternity and The Outer Worlds.

Fargo's vision to bring together developers from various disciplines had proved prophetic as the industry had ultimately shifted in that direction. However, despite working with some of the best talent in the industry, by the early 2000s, Interplay had worked itself into a financial hole. In the process, a French software publisher named Titus Interactive became a majority stakeholder, and with Interplay in the red, those investors began to squeeze Fargo out of his own company.

"Every day was a battle," Fargo says. "I just started to feel like life was too short for that. I started thinking, 'I'm a minority shareholder, and this is going to affect my health fighting every single day with these guys.' Then they said they were going to do a hostile takeover, and I said, 'Look, let's not do hostile. Here are the keys. Have at it. Good luck.'"

Fargo was on his own again, but he wasn't ready to walk away from the industry. He founded a second video game studio, naming it inXile as a cheeky nod to the fact that he had been exiled from his previous company. At this point, Fargo could have begun development on something entirely new, but he was still fond of many of his original creations like The Bard's Tale and Wasteland, so in 2003 inXile acquired the rights to Wasteland from EA. Fargo believed he was finally going to get to make Wasteland 2 – as long as he found someone to fund the project. He figured that would take a few months. It took nearly a decade.

"I would go into a pitch meeting and say, 'Hey, I got one of the leads from Fallout and I was the executive producer on both games. Here's the franchise that inspired Fallout,'" Fargo says. "I thought it was gonna be a slam-dunk pitch, but boy was I wrong. We were in one meeting, and as we were pitching, the guy was texting on his phone the entire time … We'd be pitching to 19-year-olds that had never heard of any of the products I'd worked on. We had people that only wanted licensed products, but then we'd go into another meeting and they said they didn't want licensed products, and they considered Wasteland a license."

Even after Bethesda turned Fallout into a billion-dollar franchise with the release of Fallout 3, Fargo still had trouble finding a publisher that wanted Wasteland. He began to wonder if the fans even wanted a Wasteland sequel. Then, in February 2012, Double Fine announced a Kickstarter project for the game that became Broken Age, and that kicked off a renaissance of crowdfunded indie publishing. Fargo realized that he could put Wasteland to the test and see if fans actually wanted another classic, post-apocalyptic RPG. Within months, Wasteland 2's Kickstarter page went live and more than 60,000 backers pledged $2,933,252 to make the game a reality. Wasteland was back.

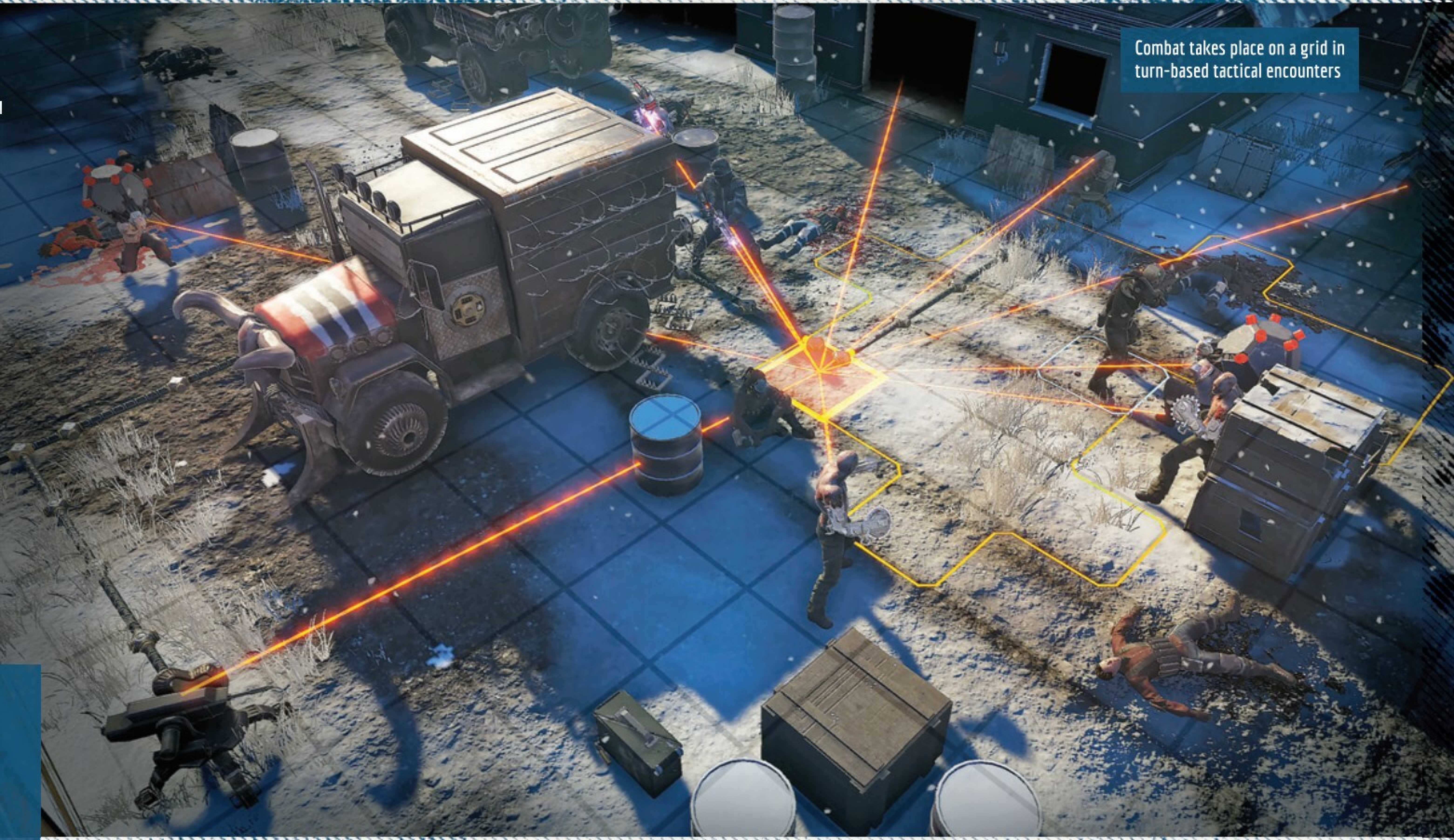
FALLOUT'S FIRE SALE

After leaving Interplay, Brian Fargo looked for ways to regain some of the intellectual property he helped create. However, in the process, he inadvertently helped Bethesda acquire the rights to Fallout. In the early 2000s, Interplay had fallen deeply in debt and was failing to pay some of its contractors. Fargo no longer worked for the company, but he felt responsible for many of the people who used to work for him, so he looked for a legal means that would help his old coworkers get paid.

"I filed an involuntary bankruptcy against [Interplay]," Fargo recalls. "I figured that would either get all of my employees paid, or it would force them to liquidate their assets, and I'd be standing in line trying to get Fallout and other trademarks. That put them in a position where they had to come up with cash to pay everybody off, which was like $3 million. So, because of the pressure that I was putting on them, they sold the rights [to Fallout] to Bethesda and I got all my old employees paid … it was a definite win, and a bigger win for Bethesda."

INXILE
inXile
MESS HALL

After Microsoft purchased inXile in 2018, the studio built new offices, but the team hasn't been able to move into the building due to the COVID-19 pandemic



Combat takes place on a grid in turn-based tactical encounters

COLORADO NEEDS YOU!

BRINGING FRIENDS TO THE END OF THE WORLD

For the first time in the series history, Wasteland 3 gives players the chance to explore with another player. Two players can start a campaign via online peer-to-peer co-op (no couch co-op). Those who play together will split up their Rangers, so each player can issue orders to half the group. Co-op offers a unique way to strategize in combat, but players won't have to remain connected at the hip. As long as both players are on the same map, they are free to wander in different directions, so one player could enter a combat scenario while the other is off buying new gear. Once a co-op session is over, both players keep a copy of the save file and can continue individual playthroughs in single-player. Fortunately, friends will always be able to jump back into their game at any point down the road.

"In a game this big where you can go anywhere and do anything, we have to spend a lot of time figuring out how to deal with all the edge cases that co-op creates," Fargo says. "You can create lots of diverging versions of the same characters and stories … It's not a PvP game, so we don't let you attack your own party, but you can mess with your co-op teammate. You can dress their characters up, so when they come back to play they're in a bondage outfit or have a pig-head mask. We have piles of snow you can throw, but you can pee on them first and give your co-op partner a disease – fun stuff where you can grief each other a little."

TAKING NAMES AND KICKING ASPEN

Vic's goons are back. I can see them milling about the ski lodge, ready for a fight. But a lot of Wasteland 3's fights are optional, and if I'm clever I can circumnavigate most of these encounters. At one point, I talk my way out of a battle by promising that I won't do anything to hurt Vic once I find him. I dodge another battle by using my melee skills to beat down a locked door that opens an alternate route. Finally, I hack a nearby computer terminal and turn a stationary gun on Vic's army. It's a well-worn RPG move, but it still feels great.

"Sneaky s--- is a skill that dictates how quickly your detection meter fills up, and you can max that out," Rogers says. "You can also get the mime quirk, which makes you look like a mime and makes you really hard to detect. So, I'm really curious to see how much of the game you can complete by having this one specialist with no combat skills whatsoever, sneak through combat areas and unlock back doors."

I'm not very sneaky, but after taking out another wave of Vic's mercenaries, I run across someone who isn't out for blood. This hostage says Vic tortured him because he stole a key that opens a secret vault full of valuables. When I ask the kid what happened to the key, he tells me that he swallowed it. If I had someone in my party who was highly skilled in field medicine, I could perform a simple surgery and retrieve the key. But I don't, which means that I either have to kill this kid and cut the key out of his guts, or move on with my life. Aside from the moral implications, there isn't a wrong choice here. I can easily progress without that key, but it means that I have to do without those rewards. On the other hand, if I kill this kid, someone is likely to notice, which could have unforeseen consequences down the line.

"Our big lean in was dialing up the world times 10 in terms of recognizing what the player is doing and having people comment on it," Fargo says. "One of the issues with Wasteland 2 was that it's much deeper than people realize, but who has time to play through it twice? For most users, the consequences seemed hardwired, but in reality, there were a lot of different ways things could have played out. We built [Wasteland 3] around letting the player know that their actions are going to affect something later on. 'Remember that thing you did? This just got affected that way,' So every time you're making a move there's a sense of, 'Oh s---, this world is really watching me.'"

As players complete tasks for people and engage in various combat situations, their Ranger's fame grows. I run across a few friendlies in Vic's ski lodge who have actually heard of my exploits. One even invites me to visit him on his family farm, opening up a whole new side quest that I might not have accessed if I'd played the game differently. Naturally, you can use your fame to your advantage. Some characters might back down from a fight once they discover who you are. On the other hand, your actions in Colorado won't endear you to everyone, and some people might hunt you down, looking for revenge.

"One of my favorite things in the game is those unexpected interactions," Campbell says. "I created a group of animal killers. We had perks that gave us experience boosts when we killed an animal. I was trying to see if I could get ahead of the level curve

by feeding off of these wild creatures. When I got into downtown Colorado Springs, I attacked a cat in an alley, but it was within eyeshot of a merchant who got ticked off at me and alerted the people nearby. The next thing I know, I've spiraled into a war with all of downtown Colorado Springs."

The team at inXile says that these divergent choices have created a lot of extra work, but the studio is better equipped to tackle those challenges than ever before. In 2018, Microsoft Studios acquired inXile, and the team has been able to use Microsoft's impressive war chest to bring Wasteland 3's level of polish to a higher standard. One of the biggest examples of this increased budget is that every line of dialogue in this massive RPG is fully voiced. In fact, the audio team has gone back to the recording studio several times for an endless number of pickup lines. "We have so many lines you're never going to hear because you're not a psychopath," Rogers says. Still, inXile feels that all this money and effort is well spent as long as it creates a more believable world.

"I love the amount of impact you can have on the game," Rogers says. "On two of my playthroughs, I have either intentionally or inadvertently gotten our second most populated non-combat zone burned to the ground. This is a place where you can get some of the best armor. It's a great place to find energy weapons, ammo, and medical supplies. There are huge quest chains that sprawl out of that zone … so that is a major hub area that we allow you to just obliterate. We let you do big, irreversible damage to your game world as a direct byproduct of your actions."

This focus on player choice is evident at the end of my play session when I finally confront Vic. After I take out a small legion of bodyguards in a nearby room, I find Vic holed up by himself, talking to a dead body. He turns to me and praises me for my skill in navigating his home base. This is my chance to kill him, of course, but he seems oddly willing to come peacefully. What's more, he even offers to join my Rangers and accompany me on my quest.

"The thing I love about Vic is that he is absolutely unhinged," Campbell says. "If you recruit him into your party, you can bring him with you through the rest of the game. I love doing that because you get to see how all the different factions in the world react to his presence. He's definitely a polarizing character. There are some Rangers that straight up leave your party because you recruited him. Some of them even turn on you, and you have to kill them because they disagree so profoundly with your choice."

In a nutshell, Wasteland 3 is all about choice and consequence. InXile has worked hard to craft a world that reacts in realistic ways. Like a lot of apocalyptic fiction, Wasteland 3 features an incredibly dark mood, but that mood is periodically interrupted with moments of absurd humor. These polar extremes say a lot about the developers who built this demented wasteland, but the game itself also says something profound about society at large.

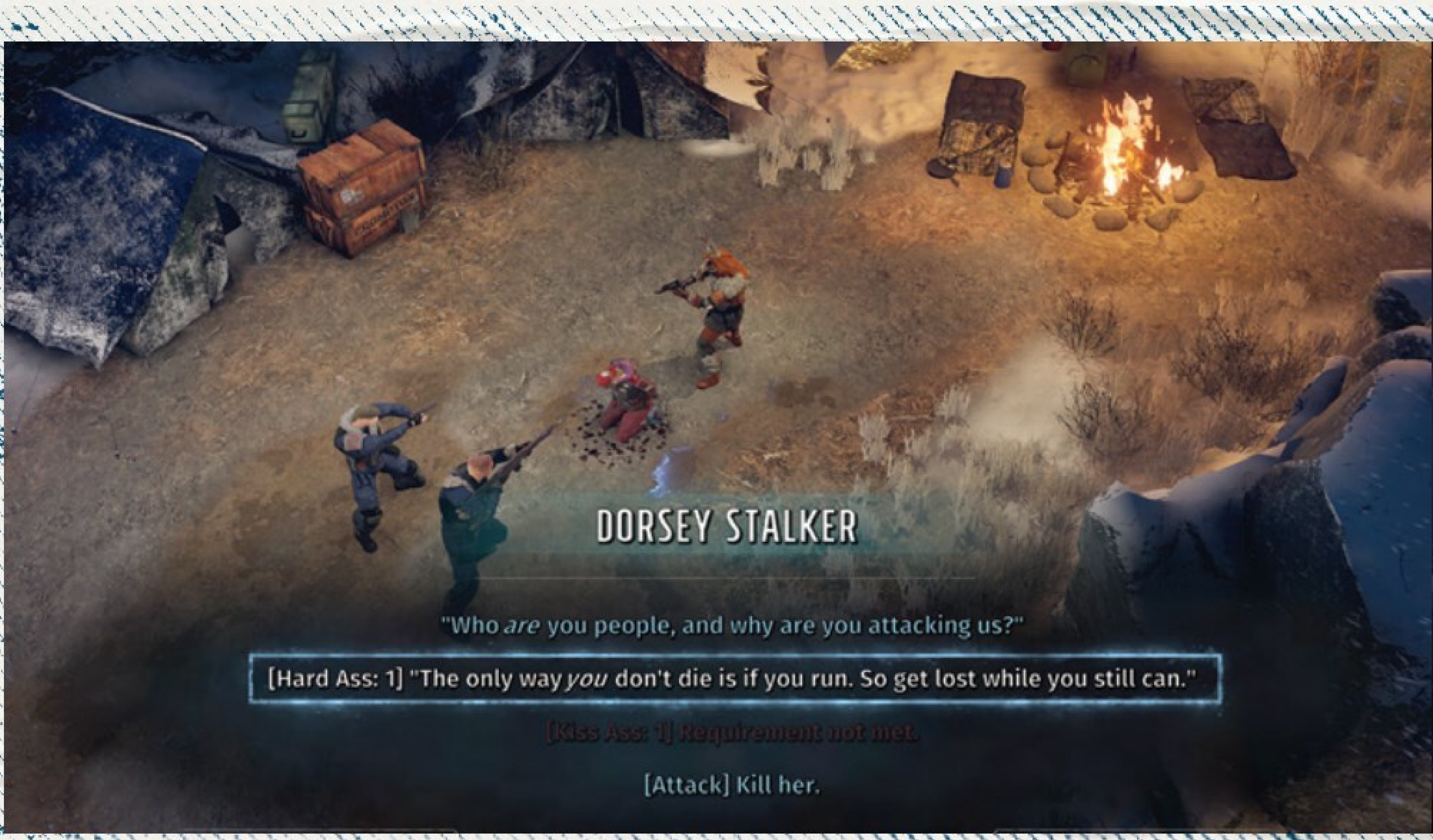
POST-POST-APOCALYPSE

Broadly speaking, apocalyptic fiction says more about the cultures it is born from than the futures it portends. *Godzilla* was created in 1954, during a decade when Japan was still grieving from the atomic devastation wreaked on Hiroshima and Nagasaki during World War II. The modern zombie movement pioneered by George Romero in *Night of the Living Dead* was born from the racial unrest of 1960s America. Even the nuclear holocaust from the original Wasteland sprang out of fears born during the Cold War.

Modern post-apocalyptic fiction has no shortage of fears to pull from. However, as inXile preps to complete its most ambitious Wasteland project yet, the studio also has to deal with a global pandemic that has brought society to its knees. InXile is now in the uncomfortable position of preparing to unleash a piece of fiction about the collapse of society to a society suffering its own seismic shift.

"The irony is not lost on us," Rogers says. "It's definitely not lost on us. And, I genuinely wonder how the post-apocalyptic series is going to change and how fans of the post-apocalyptic setting are going to change. Because their views will shift. Now everyone has a little taste of the apocalypse in them. Everyone has a little bit more context and a little more personal experience in what an apocalypse kind of feels like. I really wonder how that's gonna change things."

"Watching the way people have reacted is very interesting," Fargo adds. "Like the fact that people are sort of having parades and protesting against staying inside. You



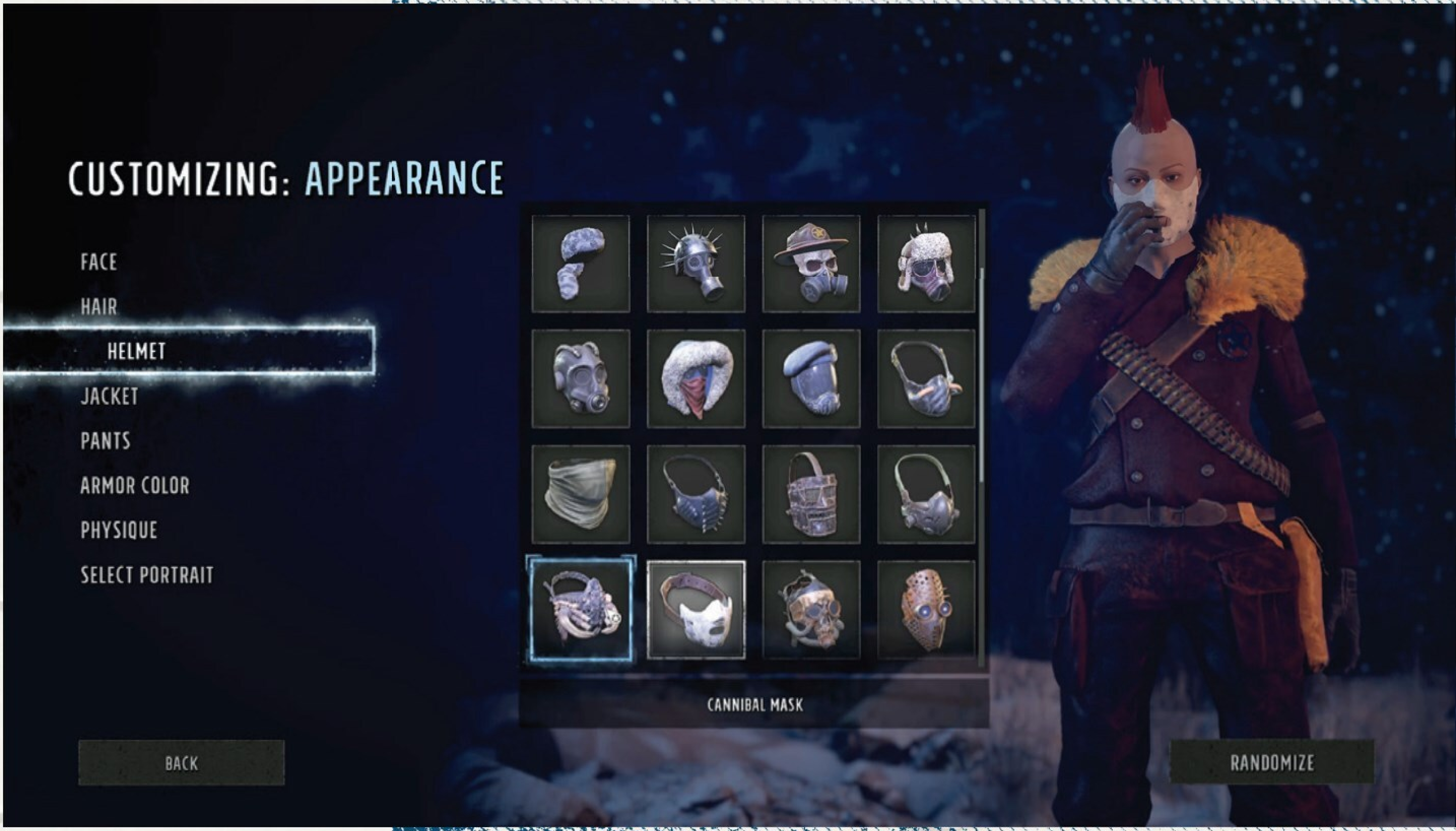
DORSEY STALKER

"Who *are* you people, and why are you attacking us?"

[Hard Ass: 1] "The only way *you* don't die is if you run. So get lost while you still can."

[Kiss Ass: 1] Requirement not met.

[Attack] Kill her.

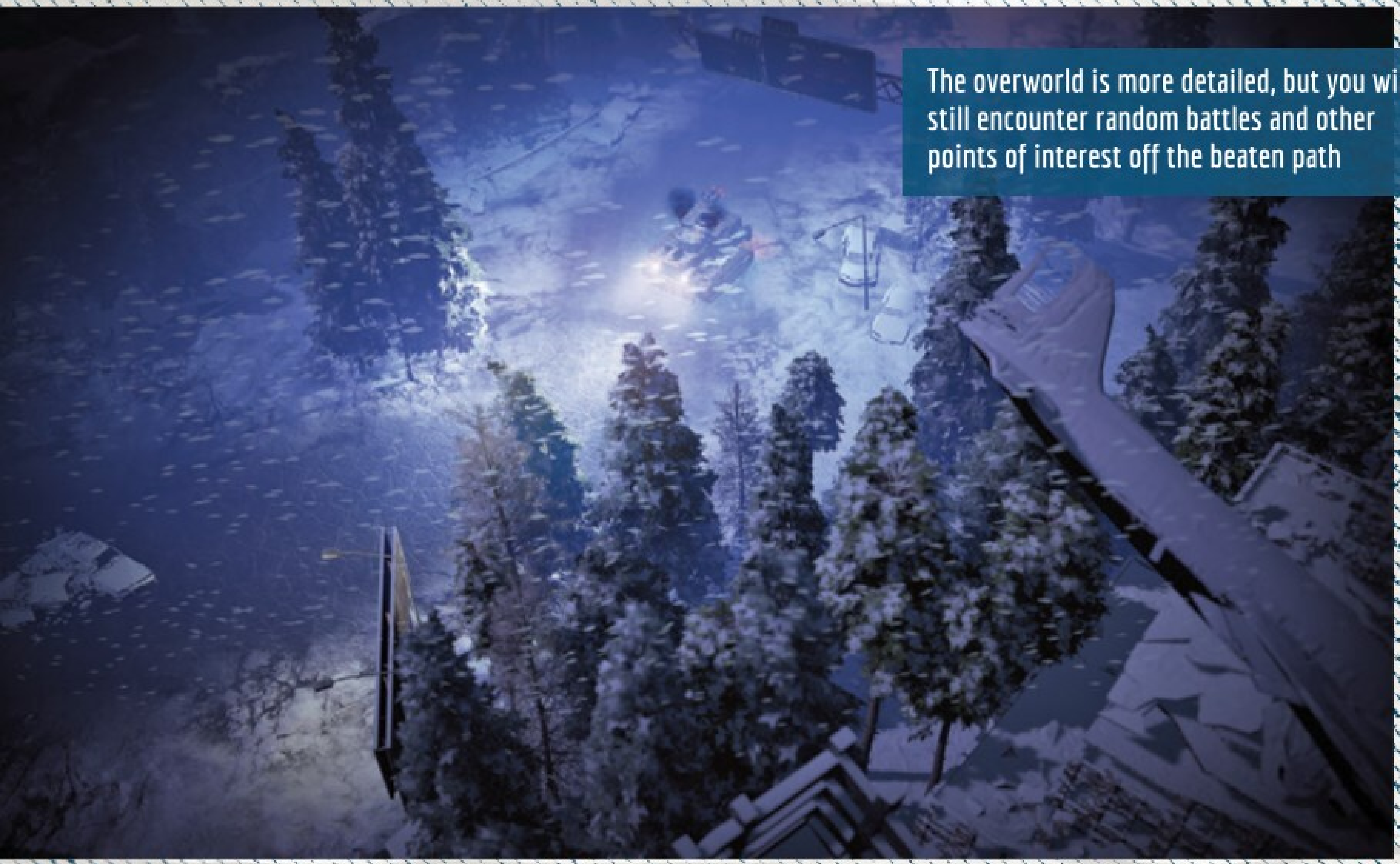


wouldn't have predicted that, right? At least, I wouldn't have thought that. I thought everybody would just listen because our health is on the line. So, I think the way disinformation spreads or personal rights or everyone's sense of what tyranny is, those topics are all very interesting right now. I think it'll shape a lot of entertainment going forward."

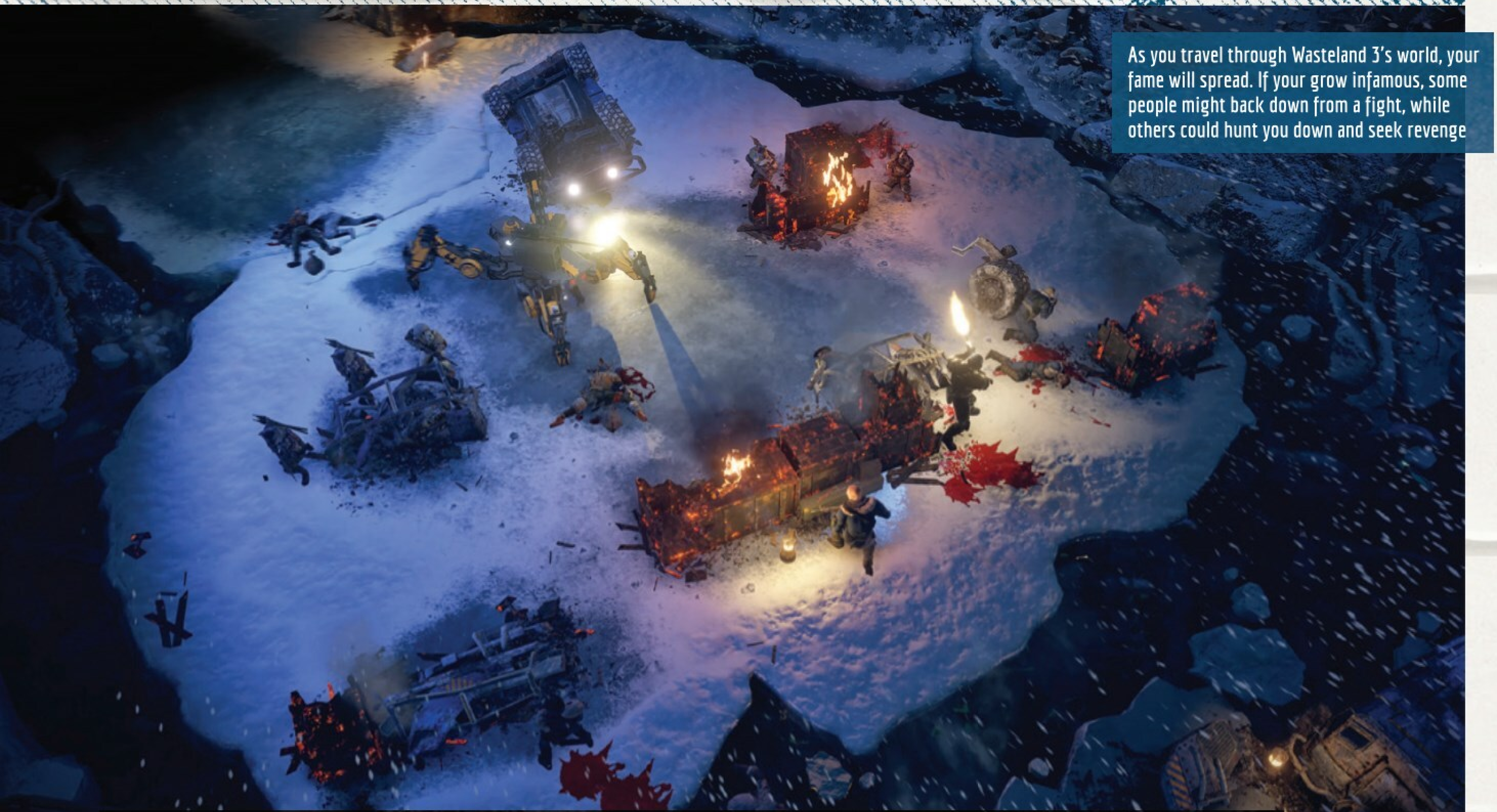
Post-apocalyptic fiction is incredibly good at commenting on civilization in the midst of a crisis, but it also offers a window into how to best cope with fear. As much as Wasteland 3 represents the most abhorrent and despicable elements of human nature, it also empowers players to impact their worlds. More than 30 years ago, the original Wasteland helped pioneered the concept of a living digital world. Wasteland 3 takes all of those elements and expands on them to an impressive degree. Like all great post-apocalyptic fiction, Wasteland 3 will hopefully be a smart social commentary, but unlike other post-apocalyptic media, Wasteland 3 also has the chance to tell us something about ourselves as we reflect on the choices that shape this digital world.

"I want to see players take on Colorado," Rogers says. "And I really, really, really want to see the achievement statistics. You know how you can see like, 'X number of players unlocked this achievement?' I want to get those metrics, because I think it will tell us something about ourselves. I think the moral choices we're presenting are gnarly enough that we're going to look at that and either be filled with hope or dread about society … or maybe a mixture of both." ◆

Looking for more on Wasteland 3? We'll have additional exclusive features on vehicle combat, Wasteland's overworld, and more rolling out throughout the month at gameinformer.com/wasteland

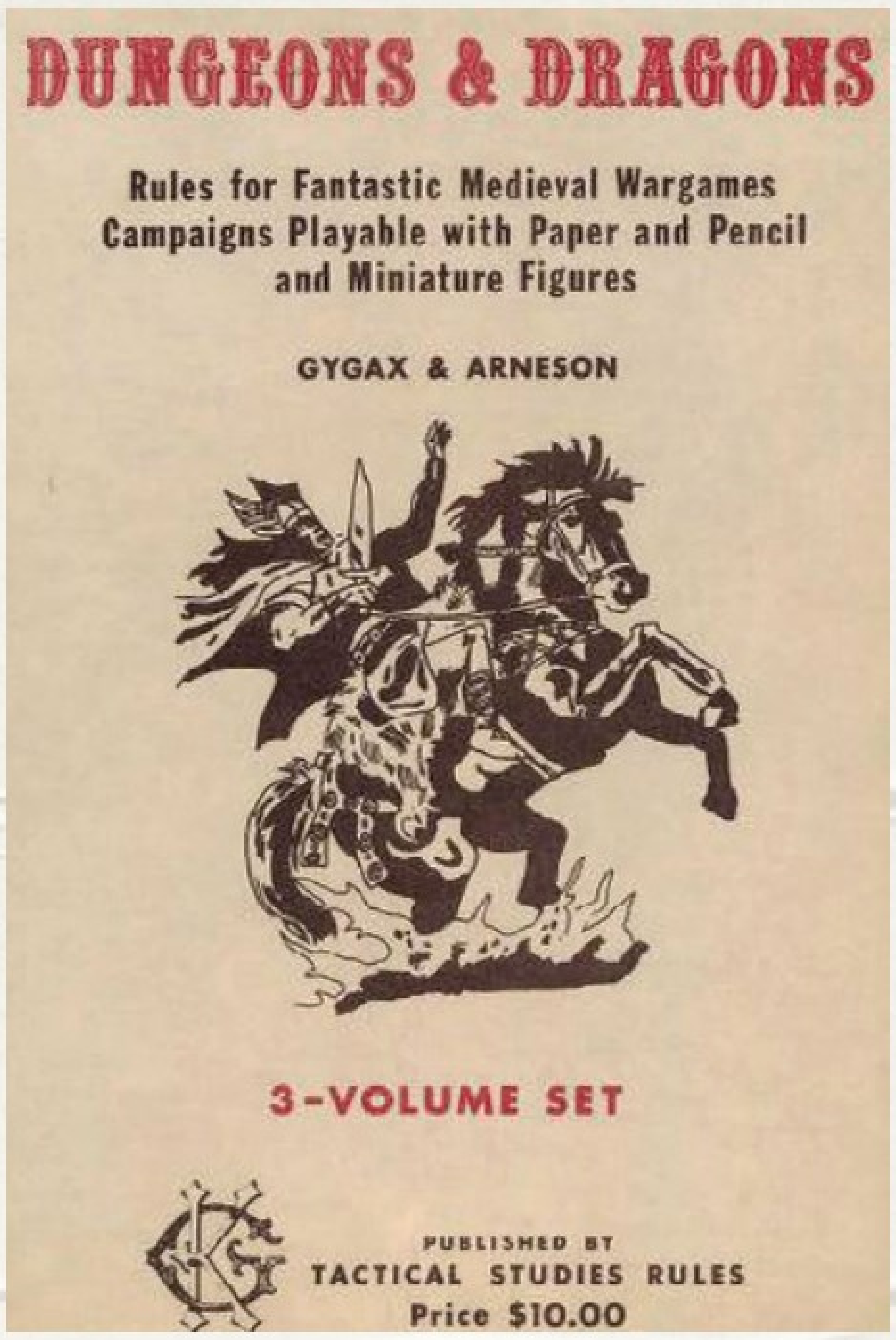


The overworld is more detailed, but you will still encounter random battles and other points of interest off the beaten path



As you travel through Wasteland 3's world, your fame will spread. If your grow infamous, some people might back down from a fight, while others could hunt you down and seek revenge

THE CRPG PRIMER



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Baldur's Gate II: Shadows of Amn

borrowing Wizardry's first-person perspective but enacting visuals and sound that better met fan expectations. Another major innovator was called Dungeon Master (1987), in which 3D graphics and a complex magic system challenged players in new and exciting ways. Might and Magic saw its first entry in 1986, setting big expectations for other franchises to meet in terms of the size and scope of a game world and its fiction. Even Sierra Entertainment, better known for its adventure games, dipped its toes into purer role-playing fare beginning in 1989 with the well-received Quest for Glory series.

A company called SSI experimented extensively during this period, coming up with (in lesser remembered projects) much of the functionality for combat and exploration that would define its later work. However, only the acquisition of the official Advanced Dungeons & Dragons license would propel the company into the stratosphere. The first "gold-box" game, Pool of Radiance (1988), was a revelation for many enthusiasts, since it used a variation of the actual D&D ruleset, and even adopted the Forgotten Realms D&D setting. Follow-ups allowed players to transfer their characters from one installment to the next, setting the stage for multi-game character arcs that would characterize later blockbusters like Mass Effect. While other games are more foundational to the genre, few would argue the primacy of SSI's gold-box games as the direct antecedents to the style that would come to dominate the genre a few years later.

That's because games like Pool of Radiance, Curse of the Azure Bonds, Champions of Krynn, and several other gold-box releases featured top-down party-based combat amid lengthy quest-lines and dungeon exploration; subsequent official D&D licensed projects would take that mantle and evolve. Of equal importance, the gold-box games also gave rise to Neverwinter Nights (1991), the first graphical MMORPG, and prefaced a profound movement that would shape the video game world as surely as it threatened many nascent social lives.

Pool of Radiance

Meanwhile, even as D&D purists were digging into licensed options, other developers began to veer further off course. Autoduel (1985) offered car combat akin to what players of the day may have seen in the Mad Max movies. Games like Star Saga (1988) launched players off Earth and established the potential for science-fiction narratives of equal grandeur to tales of knights and wizards. And Wasteland (1988), discussed extensively in our cover story, established the post-apocalyptic tone that would later help shape Fallout into a megahit.

By the mid-1990s, the role-playing game concept had spread far and wide, reaching well beyond the boundaries of the traditional CRPG. The Elder Scrolls found its beginning in 1994, destined for a growing reputation for greatness. The Ultima series continued to expand in two important directions: Ultima Underworld: The Stygian Abyss (1992) offered action and non-linear simulation elements that are still iterated on in other franchises to this day. And Ultima Online (1997) became the undisputed early benchmark for the burgeoning MMO scene. And, not to be forgotten, Blizzard took things in a decidedly action-oriented direction with Diablo (1997), spawning a whole genre all by itself.

But it was the growing presence of the isometric games of this era that cemented an understanding of the CRPG for many players, a perception that persists to this day. Fallout (1997) broke boundaries with its darkly satirical tone and challenging exploration. Baldur's Gate (1998) catapulted the licensed D&D game forward and revived interest in the entire RPG genre, during the same years that shooters and other action games were coming to dominance. Its sequel garnered even greater praise; Baldur's Gate II: Shadows of Amn (2000) is frequently cited as one of the defining role-playing games in the genre's history. And Planescape: Torment (1999) reveled in the potential of a strange extraplanar setting and experimented with minimizing combat as the central driver.

By the turn of the century, the tracking of the classic CRPG becomes far more complicated. The proliferation of multiplayer components in MMOs like Everquest (1999) and other games like BioWare's Neverwinter Nights (2002) shifted the focus to a shared world. Newer franchises like Star Wars: Knight of the Old Republic (2003) and the ongoing Elder Scrolls series increasingly broadened into the console market. World of Warcraft seemed to take over the world as it launched to tremendous acclaim in 2004. And Dragon Age: Origins (2009) made the case that a D&D-style fantasy could prosper on both PC and console platforms simultaneously. The classic CRPG persisted in various gems throughout these past two decades, culminating in a notable revival of isometric RPGs over the past five years.

For players eager to dig their teeth into these frequently massive games, you could certainly track down one of these (or dozens of other unmentioned) important historical RPGs. But it's likely that most players are more eager to see the state of the genre as it exists now. Turn the page to explore our suggestions for some of the best modern CRPGs, and find out which one might be a good fit for you. ◆

SEVEN CRPG FRANCHISES TO PLAY RIGHT NOW

PILLARS OF ETERNITY

Pillars of Eternity

If you're looking for a true spiritual successor to the likes of Baldur's Gate and Icewind Dale, your best option is Pillars of Eternity. While neither the ruleset nor setting are officially connected to Dungeons & Dragons, the Pillars of Eternity games feel both familiar and fresh. With classic fantasy styling and characters that would feel at home in any tabletop RPG campaign, this is a series that maintains what is great about isometric, party-based role-playing games while also remaining accessible to newcomers. The two entries in the franchise offer the story of a single heroic lead, but each carves out its own identity and location in the world.

Developer Obsidian Entertainment has broad experience crafting RPGs, including Star Wars: Knight of the Old Republic II: The Sith Lords, Fallout: New Vegas, and South Park: The Stick of Truth, among several others. But even with that pedigree, Pillars of Eternity presented a unique challenge – a follow-up to the D&D games of the late 1990s and early 2000s, but without the license for either rules or setting. The developer transformed that challenge into an opportunity, enacting aspects of tactical play and combat that took advantage of the digital format in ways that might feel onerous to manage in a true tabletop game.

The first Pillars of Eternity initially launched on PC in 2015, but eventually expanded with solid ports onto PS4, Xbox One, and Switch. The game tells a classic fantasy, set primarily in a sprawling wooded coastal land, and contains a complex plot about endlessly reincarnating souls. The real-time combat allows and encourages pausing to optimize tactical positioning. While combat, dungeon delving, and exploration are major components, one of the most engaging aspects is the important choices that shape the outcome of the story for both the world and your party members.

Players create and control a specially gifted foreigner, dubbed the Watcher, who gains the ability to read souls and understand aspects of his or her previous lives. Players chart a path that inevitably progresses along their chosen classes, including options like fighters and rogues alongside more exotic choices like a chanter or cipher. Notably, players also have the opportunity to invest in a stronghold acquired early in the game, growing it out with new community members and exploring a vast optional dungeon beneath it.

Pillars of Eternity II: Deadfire follows in the footsteps of its predecessor, including its availability on multiple platforms. After an initial PC release in 2018, it has since made its way to PS4 and Xbox One. Players return to the role of the Watcher, so many players will want to have the story setup of the previous game to fully appreciate returning elements. The second game's plot centers on a rampaging god that devastates the stronghold you so carefully built up in the first game, setting you forth on a mission to take down the towering deity. To do so, you follow his impossibly large footsteps out to sea, and the bulk of the game takes on a nautical theme.

The second installment improves on a number of features, including a more readable and easy-to-parse combat system, item crafting, and deeper class and multiclass options. But for many players, the biggest addition is the existence of your ship, which allows for freeform wandering of the sea, investigating new islands you discover along the way, and even engaging in ship-to-ship combat for that genuine pirate battle vibe.

Both Pillars of Eternity games are great fun, and a worthwhile place to dig into the genre if you want something that feels old-school in tone, but with features and gameplay that are modern and inviting.

Pillars of Eternity II: Deadfire

TORMENT: TIDES OF NUMENERA

If your goal is to find something especially unusual, Torment: Tides of Numenera (2017) is a sure bet. In all the ways that matter, Torment is a spiritual successor to the widely lauded Planescape: Torment (1999). But where that earlier game borrowed an extraplanar corner of the D&D universe, this newer game embraces the much newer tabletop RPG setting of Numenera.

A billion years from today, Earth has seen the rise and fall of many civilizations, and when a new species of humans arises on the planet, the unimaginable technology of those lost societies is indistinguishable from magic. One particularly canny individual has unlocked the key to immortality from some of that ancient technology, and gained the ability to jump between an endless series of bodies. You awaken as a new personality in one of that being's discarded husks, left to explore the world and discover the nature of your own existence.

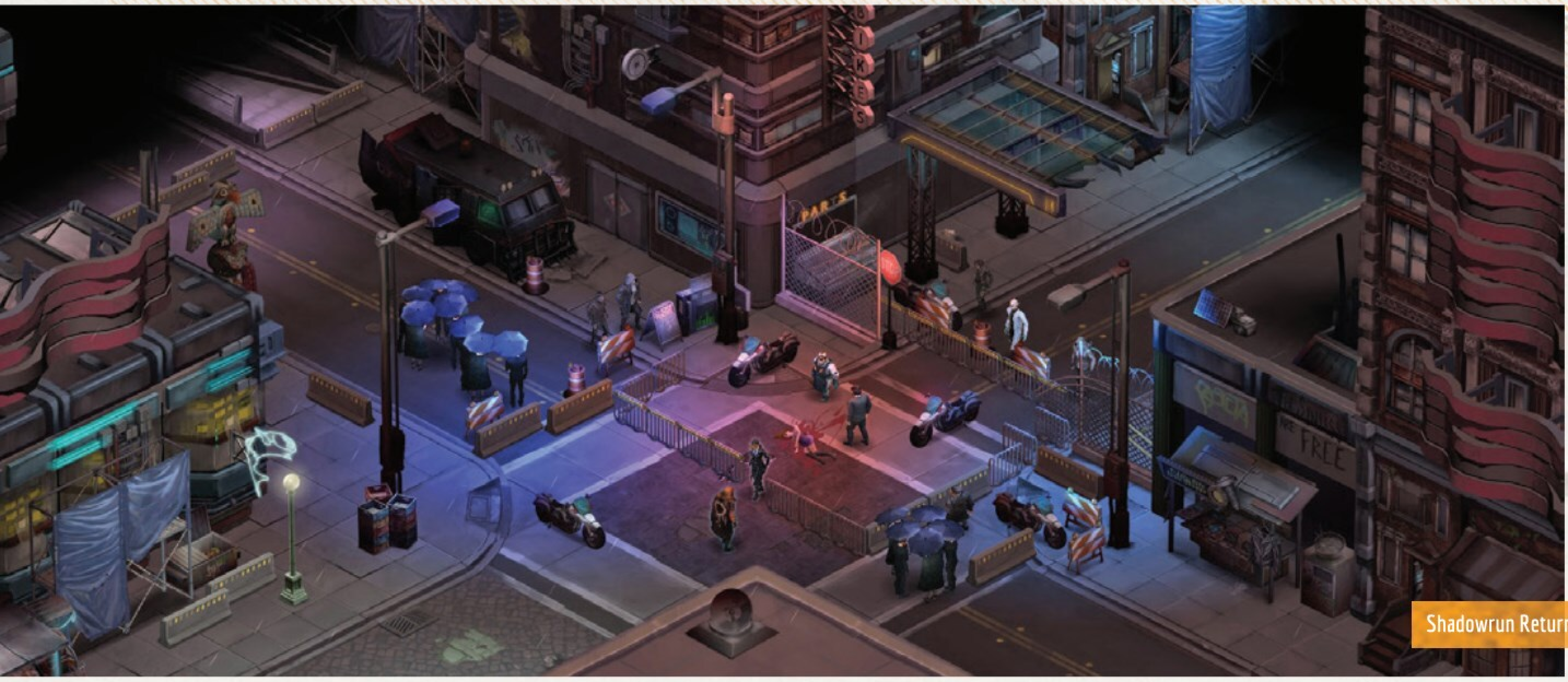
If all that sounds like the setup to an existential investigation into the nature of consciousness and memory, well, then you've grasped exactly the level of complexity that Torment is going for. While the game features the trappings of a classic isometric RPG, including a rich leveling system and an interesting approach to battle and other crises, developer inXile was far more interested in the potential for philosophical musing and surreal world-building – and the studio knocked those aspects out of the park.

It's not unusual to spend hours without getting in a real fight, but it's certainly not boring. You might run into a merchant who is gradually transforming into an insect because of radiation from the items he's selling. Or an old man who works alongside his younger self, prior to being flung back in time to perpetuate the cycle. In one especially memorable sequence, an entire city area is composed of a miles-wide extradimensional being with mouths that open into different universes. At nearly every turn, Torment challenges conventions and expectations, and keeps the player guessing about what is around the next corner.

In addition to engaging characters, the move away from battles as a central focus means that non-combat encounters often have significant depth and lots of opportunities for interesting decision-making. A character with strong persuasion skills or facility with machinery can profoundly affect outcomes. But where a different game might have an encounter about resolving a clan war between goblin tribes, here the encounter might be your character temporarily dying, and entering the metaphysical labyrinth within his mind to save a spectral woman hiding inside.

Torment: Tides of Numenera, which is available on PS4 and Xbox One as well as PC, is a master class in rich fiction development and a rousing exploration of the human condition. With nonlinear narrative structure and an almost novelistic depth to its dialogue and descriptions, it's built to appeal to players who are ready to dive deep in more ways than one.

SHADOWRUN RETURNS



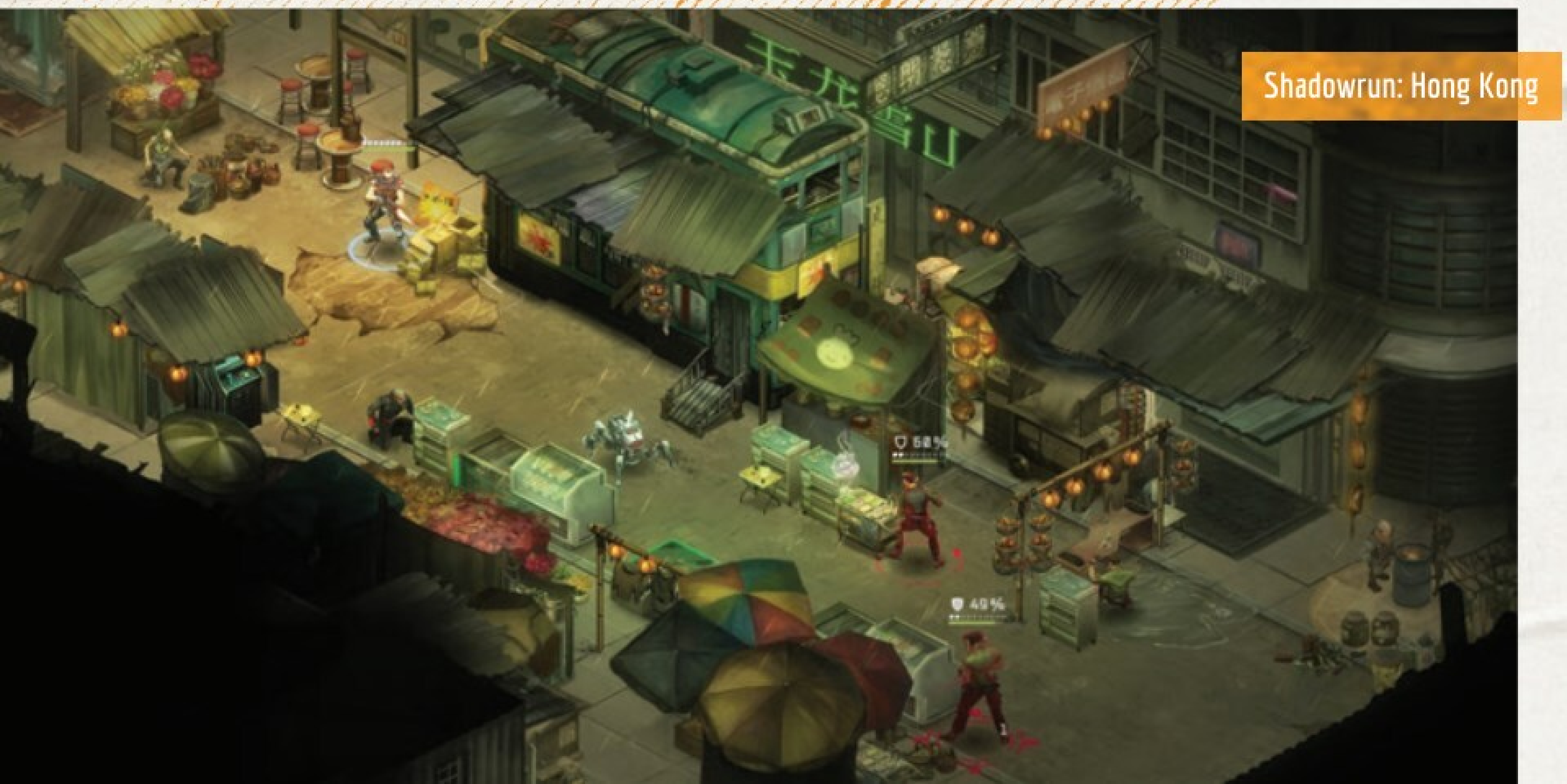
Early in the isometric RPG revival of the last decade, Harebrained Schemes released Shadowrun Returns (2013). The project and its sequels remain well worth checking out thanks to some smart tactical combat and the excellent utilization of one of the best settings in tabletop gaming.

In its earliest days, the Shadowrun tabletop RPG was a sort-of counterpoint to the D&D craze. While it kept the magical tone, the elves, and the dragons (among other fantasy trappings), it transferred that entire high-fantasy conceit into a cyberpunk future. The dragon might be running a tech corporation. And the elf might be an enterprising street samurai, working with a team to hack into the corporation's mainframe. The setting and game were wildly imaginative, and have remained fixtures in the scene through multiple editions over the last several decades.

After some well-loved console RPGs from the early '90s, developer Harebrained Schemes recognized the franchise's potential for revival. The studio was one of the first to experiment with bringing back the old style of isometric RPGs that had, at that point, fallen mostly out of favor. The result was a series of games, including a Seattle-based Shadowrun Returns, an expansion called Daggerfall (2014), set in Berlin, that was eventually given its own standalone release, and another installment called Shadowrun: Hong Kong (2015) that transported the whole concept across the Pacific.

In each installment, the real joy is in seeing the interweaving of science fiction and fantasy conventions (often with a hefty dose of noir detective), and the ways those seemingly competing milieus manage to work together so well. Neon-lit streets recall the world of *Blade Runner*, but characters calling up spells and trolls swinging giant swords help everything feel surprising and thrilling. The 2D backgrounds are beautifully drawn, and go a long way to establishing the inimitable setting.

More than many other modern CRPGs, Shadowrun Returns and its follow-ups focus on cover-based tactics, looking to games like the modern-day XCOM for inspiration. The developers offer interesting twists to those tactical throwdowns that incorporate your recent role-playing decisions. Did you pick up the meat earlier in the level? Then perhaps you can distract the hell hounds when battle threatens. You can also expect a host of colorful characters that match the science/fantasy vibe. The dialogue, in particular, is well-written and engaging.



Each of the three recent Shadowrun adventures is rewarding in its own right, and you could tackle whichever setting sounds most appealing. For newcomers to the genre, one big advantage to Shadowrun games is their length; they are shorter than many of the other titles we're recommending, so you could expect to play through a complete story without spending dozens and dozens of hours. Then, if you like the setting, you could always expand into the other entries. Regardless, Shadowrun is an important fixture in the history of the role-playing, with a flavor that might be just right for someone looking to veer away from traditional fantasy.

DIVINITY: ORIGINAL SIN

Divinity: Original Sin

Divinity: Original Sin laid the groundwork, but its follow-up, Divinity: Original Sin II, took the elemental interactions, tactical combat, and vast world where you have an incredible amount of freedom and choice to a whole new level. The franchise does not rigorously adhere to the ancient titles that inspired it in function and form, instead choosing to move the genre forward while retaining many of the defining principles and philosophies.

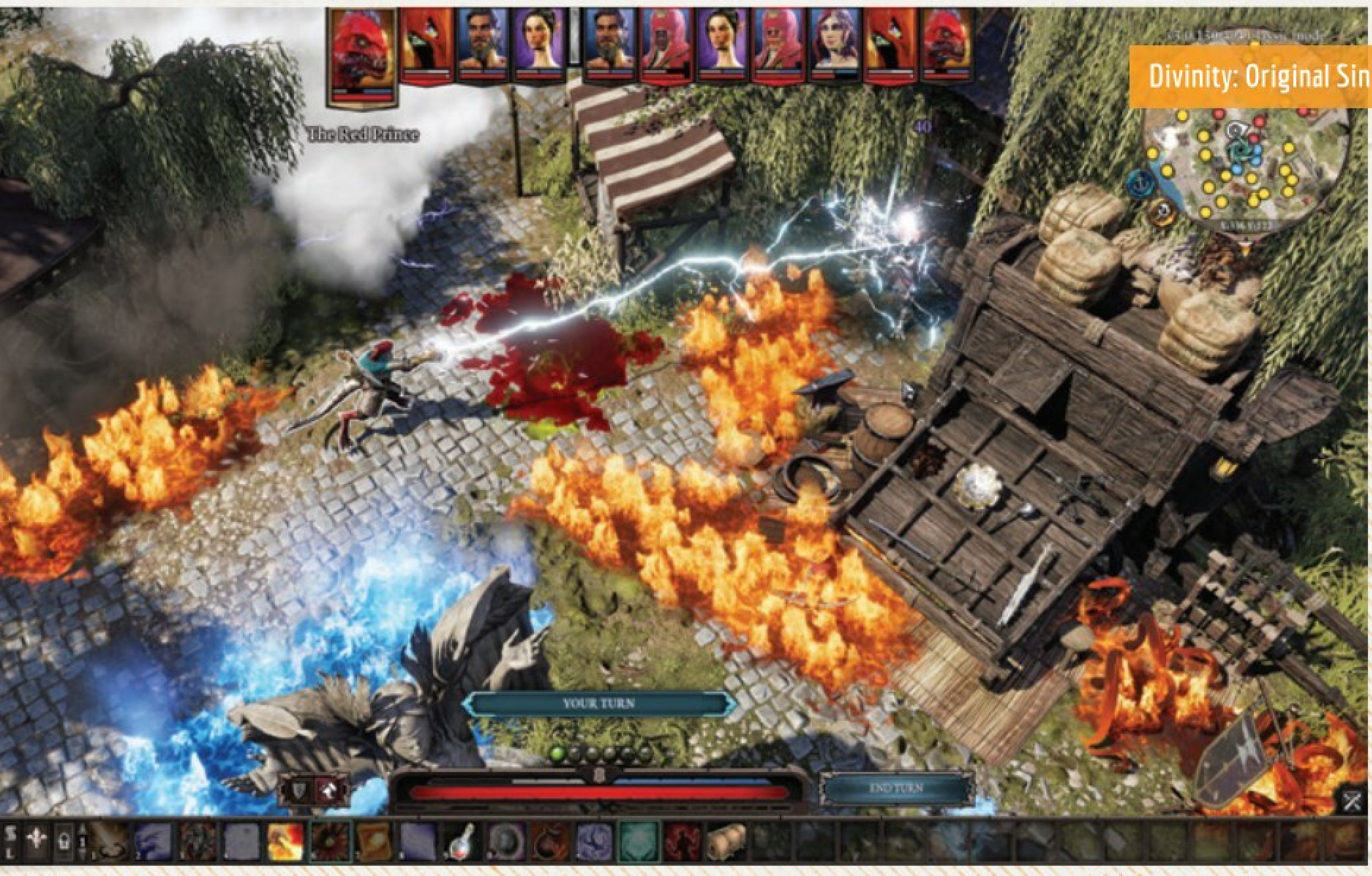
After breaking free of the traditional publishing arrangement's yoke, Swen Vincke and Larian Studios were finally able to execute on some of their longstanding designs. This ushered forth a party-based RPG romp that feels true to the early days of the Black Isle RPGs. It still featured special new quirks to the formula, including a tactical point system for turn-based combat and the option to include co-op multiplayer. While Larian has plenty of games under its belt, the long road toward its independence is littered with rushed games, canceled projects, and domineering publishers. Kickstarter and crowd-funding gave the studio a chance to blaze new trails.

The first Divinity: Original Sin landed in 2014, and surprised players a year later when it also came to Xbox One and PlayStation 4 – highly unusual for a classic isometric RPG. Shockingly, the control schemes and couch-co-op opportunities foreshadowed that Larian would continue to take its titles to console after tuning them up on PC via a combination of early access community feedback and post-launch polish. Larian actually went back and remade the entirety of Act 4 in Original Sin II after release, because it didn't feel it was good enough, which is a testament to Larian's unwavering support of its titles.

The first Original Sin introduced an elemental combination system that would come to define the franchise, where players could place water on the ground and run electric currents through it for a massive shock; or create blinding vapor clouds, toxic explosions, and torrential conflagrations. Original Sin II built upon everything that the first set up, with a better story and more interesting characters. You can craft your own party members from scratch or use creative characters already provided, like the arrogant Red Prince or the lovable undead egghead Fane. Dramatic and important choices litter the experience and create a truly custom ending where all the changes you made to the world are laid one after one in a storybook finale. While the first entry is great, the sequel is truly excellent – and requires no previous experience. If you want to see what all the fuss is about, Original Sin II is where you should begin. It is available on PlayStation 4, Xbox One, Switch, and PC.

You may choose to simply play through this series like any other RPG, whacking away at enemies with swords or shooting them with bows and spells, but doing so is depriving yourself of the true experiential immersion that permeates every inch of these games. Perhaps you go all-in on a telemancer, flinging your foes into each other or off cliffs. Want to get really wild? Try a build where you stack rocks, books, and anything else you can find into crates and barrels – and then rocket them at your opponents with your mind.

While many games are strict adherents to the titles that brought the genre into the spotlight so many years ago, Larian took significant risks to move forward. After the studio came back from the brink of death multiple times, Larian is finally flying high, with the gambit paying off and producing one of the best RPGs to ever grace the realm of interactive entertainment.



Divinity: Original Sin II

MIGHT AND MAGIC X: LEGACY

The Might and Magic series is a fleeting memory today. Its possible pinnacle was a moment in time in the early '90s where one could install two different games – Might and Magic V: Darkside of Xeen and Might and Magic VI: Clouds of Xeen – on the same PC to create one ultimate game, the World of Xeen, that blew minds with voice acting and cinematic cutscenes. The franchise is also the odd one out in this gathering of greats, as it is more rooted in Wizardry and The Bard's Tale than it is in Baldur's Gate or Icewind Dale.

The series is all about customizing your crew and mapping out the world as you search for hidden dungeons and secret stashes. Party creation is freeform and encourages you to go wild. Play as all mages, berserkers, or clerics – whatever strikes your fancy.

Might and Magic X: Legacy (2014) is more streamlined in your choices, and the faithful may balk that hours don't need to be spent obtaining the perfect dice rolls to create a god-tier conjurer, but it's a great way to get new players into the fold. The same can be said about many of the other aspects of the game; unlike the older titles, it's less likely that you'll wander a few stray tiles off the beaten path and encounter an enormous golem that instantly annihilates your entire party. Legacy is far more accessible, a lot prettier, and the perfect way for a new player to delve into a world of classic fantasy.

The counterpoint to this is that there's not nearly as much complexity, optional content, or esoteric abilities to explore – but you can always go back and revisit the older games if you find yourself fiending for more after seeing what Legacy offers. At its core, the Might and Magic franchise thrives on experimentation, exploration, and exploitation. Remember that giant metal golem that slaughtered your fresh-faced party as you hunted some bees? There's nothing better than coming back later with a team of wizened warriors and wizards and shattering him into pieces.

Games that channel the spirit of the old map-crawlers are few and far between, and Might and Magic was one of the best. Let's hope it gets a chance at some fresh entries in the years to come.

PATHFINDER: KINGMAKER

Owlcat Games took to Kickstarter to bring a taste of this classic RPG back. While it hit the scene a bit later than many of the other entries in the "CRPG renaissance," it enjoys having a vast, established tabletop universe to draw from. Without getting too deep in the weeds, Paizo Publishing's 2009 Pathfinder is essentially a break off from 3rd edition Dungeons & Dragons, which captured a huge branch of players that had no interest in Wizards of the Coast's 4th and 5th edition offerings.

Kingmaker has roots in the classic Infinity Engine titles that CRPGs are known for. Real-time, pause-and-play combat keeps battles close to the genre's early DNA, and you have a lot of class depth to pursue. By combining its potent D&D roots with CRPG designs, the end result is an amalgamation that is loyal to the tabletop but with some considerations to the world of video games.

You also work up your very own kingdom. Your choices – whether they are good, bad, or perhaps morally gray – change the shape of your kingdom. While you start the game with only a few units, you can swarm the screen later on with a plethora of pets and deck out your crew with an impressive array of armaments.

As in Pathfinder proper, there's plenty of complexity here for those who want it, with an absolute smorgasbord of classes, characters, and abilities to master. If anything, one of the game's weaknesses is the lack of onboarding and explanation, so you may need to look up rulesets and kingdom guides.

Those who are immersed in the world of Pathfinder will undoubtedly recognize familiar faces, but no prior knowledge is necessary for this adventure. If you are hungry for a complex game that's extremely devoted to extensive source material and adherent to the glory days of the CRPG, Pathfinder: Kingmaker might be just what you're looking for.

DISCO ELYSIUM

This 2019 adventure from developer ZA/UM is unlike any CRPG that came before it. You still point-and-click your way through an isometric world, but Disco Elysium breaks new ground in the genre by subverting player expectations. Instead of exploring a vast fantasy world, you walk around a single neighborhood in a grimy city. Instead of a combat system, you have elaborate internal dialogues that help you solve a murder. And instead of controlling a hero who saves the day, your detective is a rock-bottom disaster.

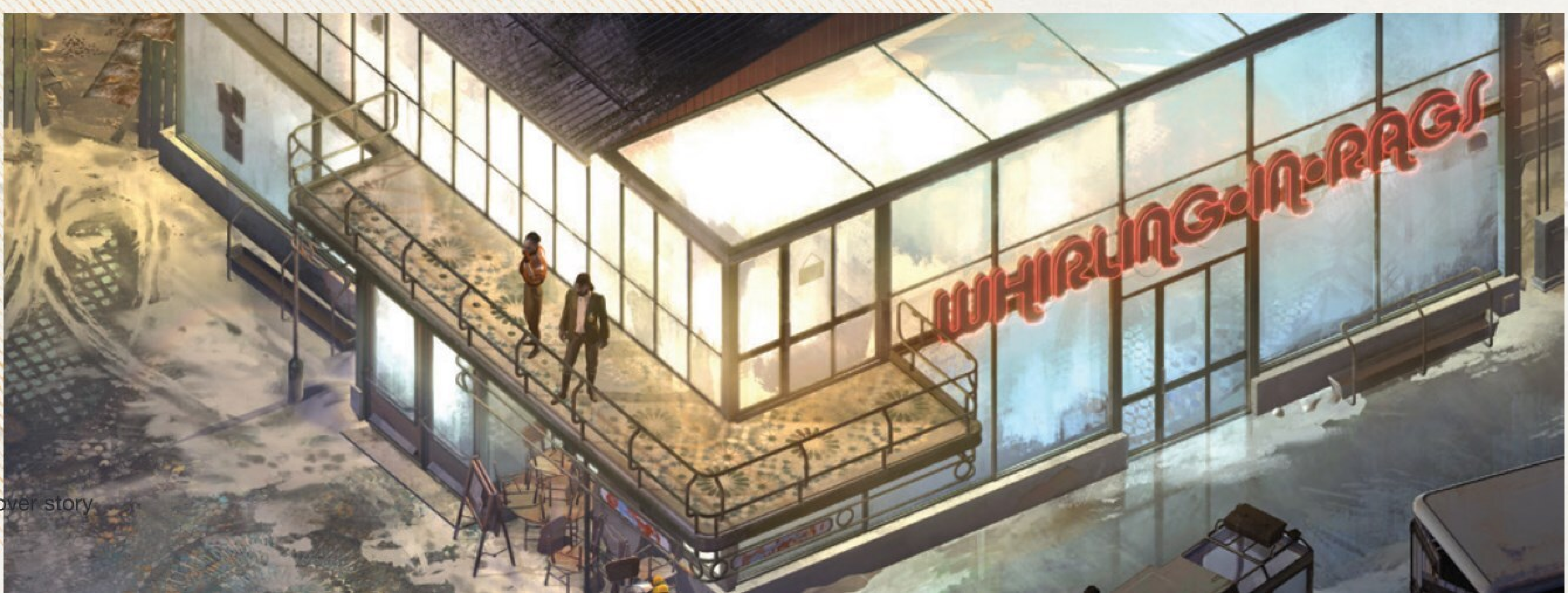
You wake up in a hotel room after a bender, already well on the way to blowing the murder investigation you are supposed to be conducting. You can't remember your past. You can't find your clothes. You can't pay your hotel bill. That's just where things start; players control how events develop from there, making choices through conversations and actions. These decisions range from subtle to major, but all of them help color the narrative in compelling ways and determine what breed of bad cop you really are.

Your personality is represented by an array of mental facets that are effectively vying for control of your mind. Representing your impulses, intuition, and abilities, these different splinters of your mind chime in during dialogue to inform and guide you. Physical Instrument wants you to break down the door. Visual Calculus helps you count footprints in the mud. Electrochemistry thinks you should take drugs. Each of these facets is like a separate character, represented through fantastic writing and clever dialogue flourishes. Which attributes you choose to indulge or deny have a drastic effect on the outcome of the game and your development as a character.

This is where the RPG progression of Disco Elysium comes into play; you invest points in these facets, which increases your likelihood of success when faced with skill checks relating to them. You have 24 options in all, so you can't prioritize everything, forcing you to make intriguing choices about how you view your character and his personality. Want to be a detective driven by intuition and hunches? Spend your points on Inland Empire. Want to be a know-it-all who brings the right facts to every situation? Try Encyclopedia. But no outcome is ever certain; even with a high aptitude for a skill, the dice rolls of any check can always go badly and lead to unexpected (but not necessarily bad) consequences.

Through conversations and skill checks, you gather clues that bring you closer to finding the culprit. Your investigation takes place in the fictional city of Revachol – a fascinating setting that feels strangely grounded, despite the presence of inexplicable technology and supernatural elements. As you visit derelict apartments, struggling businesses, and ruined churches, you meet an array of memorable characters that could be enemies or friends. Chief among your allies is lieutenant Kim Kitsuragi, your partner/minder who knows exactly when to put up with your nonsense and when to stop it – the perfect counterpoint to the chaos your hero exudes.

Disco Elysium isn't exactly a franchise, since it is a single game unattached to any larger property. However, considering all of the accolades it has won (including The Game Awards' Best RPG of 2019 and the BAFTA Games Award for Narrative), many gamers are certainly eager for a follow-up. Disco Elysium is currently only available on PC, though ZA/UM has announced plans to bring it to PS4, Xbox One, and Switch later this year.



THE WAY FORWARD FOR WIZARDS AND WARRIORS

MEDIE
TIMES

VAL

Comedy and carnage collide in Torn Banner Studios' Chivalry 2

BY **DANIEL TACK**

» Platform
PC

» Style
64-Player Online Action

» Publisher
Torn Banner Studios

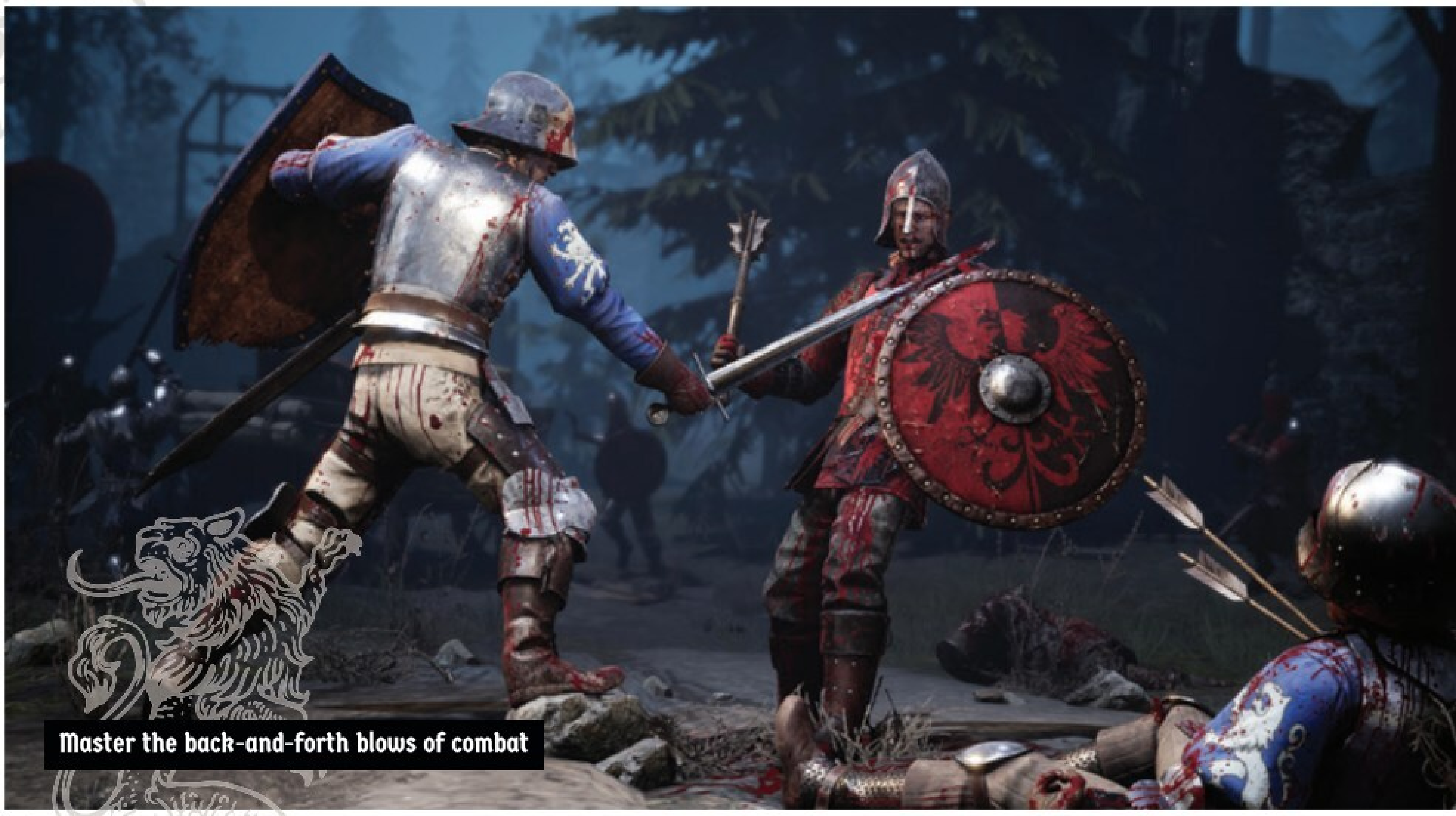
» Developer
Tripwire Interactive

» Release
2020

Out of the many PC titles I've explored over the decades, one particular franchise has somehow escaped my gaze: Torn Banner Studios' Chivalry. Despite making waves as a "Medieval melee FPS" when Chivalry: Medieval Warfare hit in 2012, I never picked up a sword and got into the mix. With Chivalry 2 on the horizon and scheduled for a release on the Epic Games Store this year, I decided it was time to change all that. And what better way to experience the game than to dive in completely blind with some of the developers? Join me as I explore the Dark Forest map in Chivalry 2 and beyond in my first foray into this bloody, boisterous brawl.

It's my first time playing any kind of Chivalry, and the loadout screen for my first adventure is easy to understand. Four core classes form the backbone of your character selection: Knight, Vanguard, Footman, and Archer. Within each core class, there is a good deal of customization and development as you unlock specializations and sub-classes, where you can, at the broad level, make a class more offensive or defensive oriented and dig deep into various weapons. I select the knight and a heavy two-handed club and shoot out into the action, right into the middle of an existing conflict. We're in a map called Dark Forest, one that I'm told is a classic from the original Chivalry: Medieval Warfare. I'm faced with an easy-to-grasp objective: We're escorting a caravan from point A to point B, and it functions a lot like a payload from Overwatch or Team Fortress 2. Torn Banner points out that while it may look and feel like a payload objective at first, each map and scenario involves multiple active phases. If we succeed in moving the caravan, the objectives will shift into manning catapults, laying siege to a location, and taking on a duke in a keep. The team's goal is to make each mission feel different and special, sort of creating a variable medieval-fantasy playground inspired by big, epic movies, like the assault on Helm's Deep from *The Lord of the Rings: The Two Towers* or a gigantic battle from *Braveheart*.

You come at the King, you best not miss


Master the back-and-forth blows of combat

BLOODY GOOD BRAWLING

However, a huge difference from traditional escort-mission scenarios is noticeable immediately: The battlefield is absolute insanity. There are multiple fights occurring all around me, and it's a little overwhelming at first to even determine where I should swing my giant bludgeon. There's also a lot of screaming, and I note that I, too, can unleash a battle cry by tapping the appropriate key. Is this some kind of buff? I ask the Torn Banner team when I should be using what I assume is some kind of rallying skill. The question brings up a variety of chuckles and laughs. "The scream button," as it's sometimes known, is simply for fun – but people absolutely love to hammer it as they go in for some gory smashing and thrashing. And as I find out quickly after I enter my first real skirmish, there's gore by the buckets and severed limbs galore in this game. The violence is exaggerated and gratuitous, but it's curbed by the sheer absurdity of it all. The neverending blood spurts and hewn organs are more Monty Python than *Saving Private Ryan*.

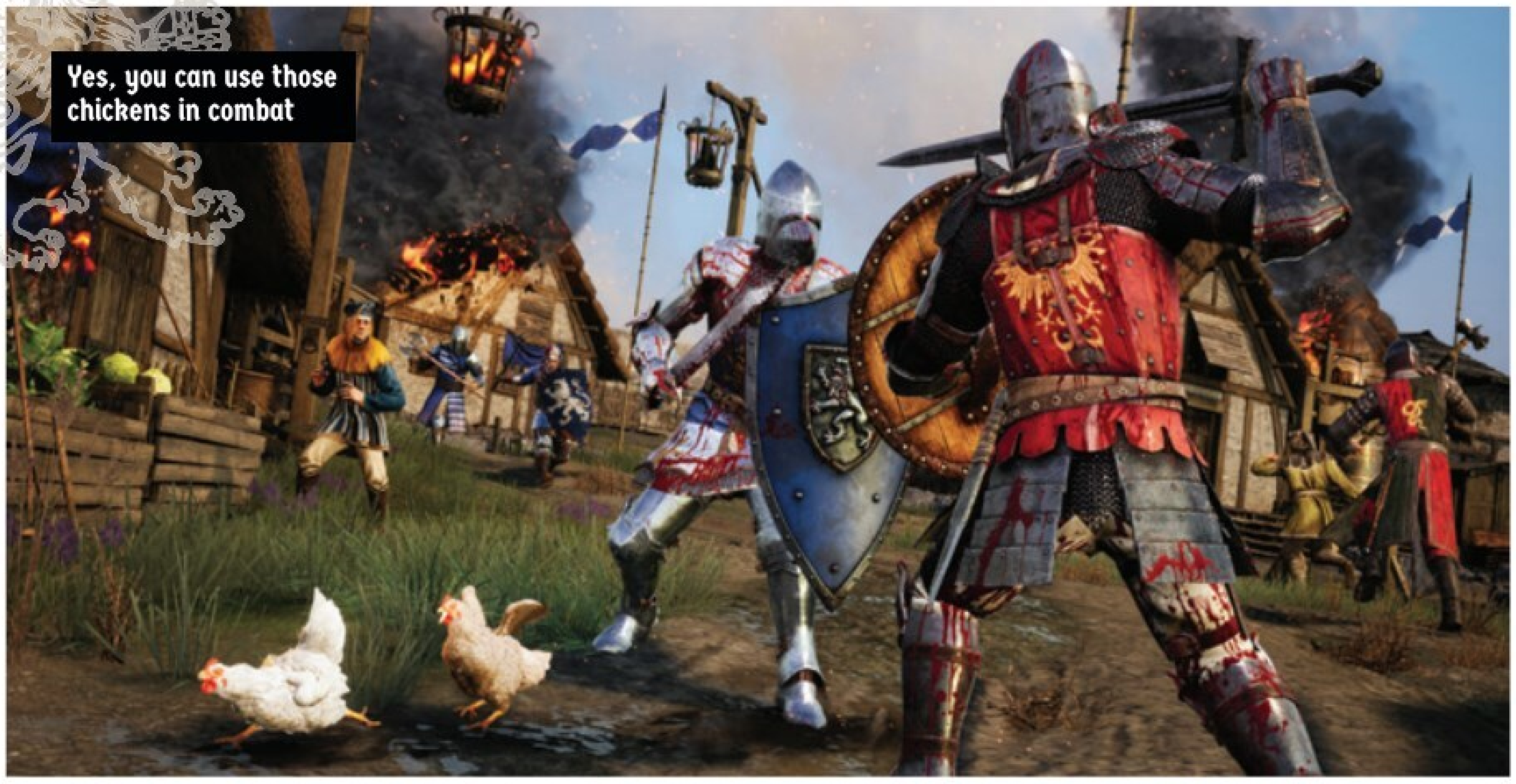
As I'm quick to learn, the game takes plenty of inspiration from Monty Python, specifically the 1975 film *Monty Python and the Holy Grail*. As a fan of the classic comedy, I notice another tie-in when one of my arms gets hacked off as I'm slamming another warrior's face in; the message "It's just a flesh wound" flashes across the screen as a bar ticks down. When the bar expires, you die, but until then, you're free to continue wreaking havoc with whatever limbs you have left. This sort of ridiculous ultraviolence carved from the enigmatic and now meme-worthy scene with the Black Knight is the standard here, and it's a constant stream of rollicking, roiling excess.

Not only can you hurl a Dane axe into someone from afar or chop someone's head clean off with a longsword, but you're encouraged to use everything that isn't nailed down to get an edge in combat. Maybe that means grabbing an empty tankard sitting on an inn's table and throwing it at your enemy. Or perhaps you scan the environment and come up with a broom, a bell, an apple, a hunk of bread, or even a chicken. In the heat of battle, executing a battle cry and then going in for a lethal chicken punch is considered an honorable (and incredibly goofy) occurrence. Yes, you can even pick up a slain combatant's severed head, run around screaming with it, and then use it to pummel his allies into submission.

CASUAL, COMPETITIVE, AND CREATIVE COMBAT

Up until this point, I've been holding my own in battle fairly well with the most rudimentary of controls. I'm getting by with just a few mouse clicks and hotkeys to swap weapons around. Some of this may be due to the dev team going easy on me for the sake of the demo, but in general it has to do with the ease of core-level combat. The system in Chivalry 2 allows for anyone to pick up and slash, slam, and chop their way to some victories, especially in the center of a chaotic battlefield, but it also rewards masters for learning the ropes. Systems that seem simple often have nuances that take significant time and skill to master.

For instance, I'm told that one of the first things players generally take to training is the concept of "dragging." Instead of keeping your cursor or targeting reticle on your enemy in combat, it behooves you to "drag" your mouse and character in a fashion that your swing will connect earlier than if you had stood stoic and still, leaning into your weapon arc. There's a dance that forms when two individuals clash, where the offender is rewarded for constant aggression and the defender must find a window to counter. If you're the first one to land a blow, your best bet is to continue swinging until your opponent is mush. On the other side of things, if you find yourself in a defensive scenario blocking or parrying incoming blows, your best opportunity is to wait or create a window where your next swing will turn the tables, with the hunter becoming the hunted in a single strike.

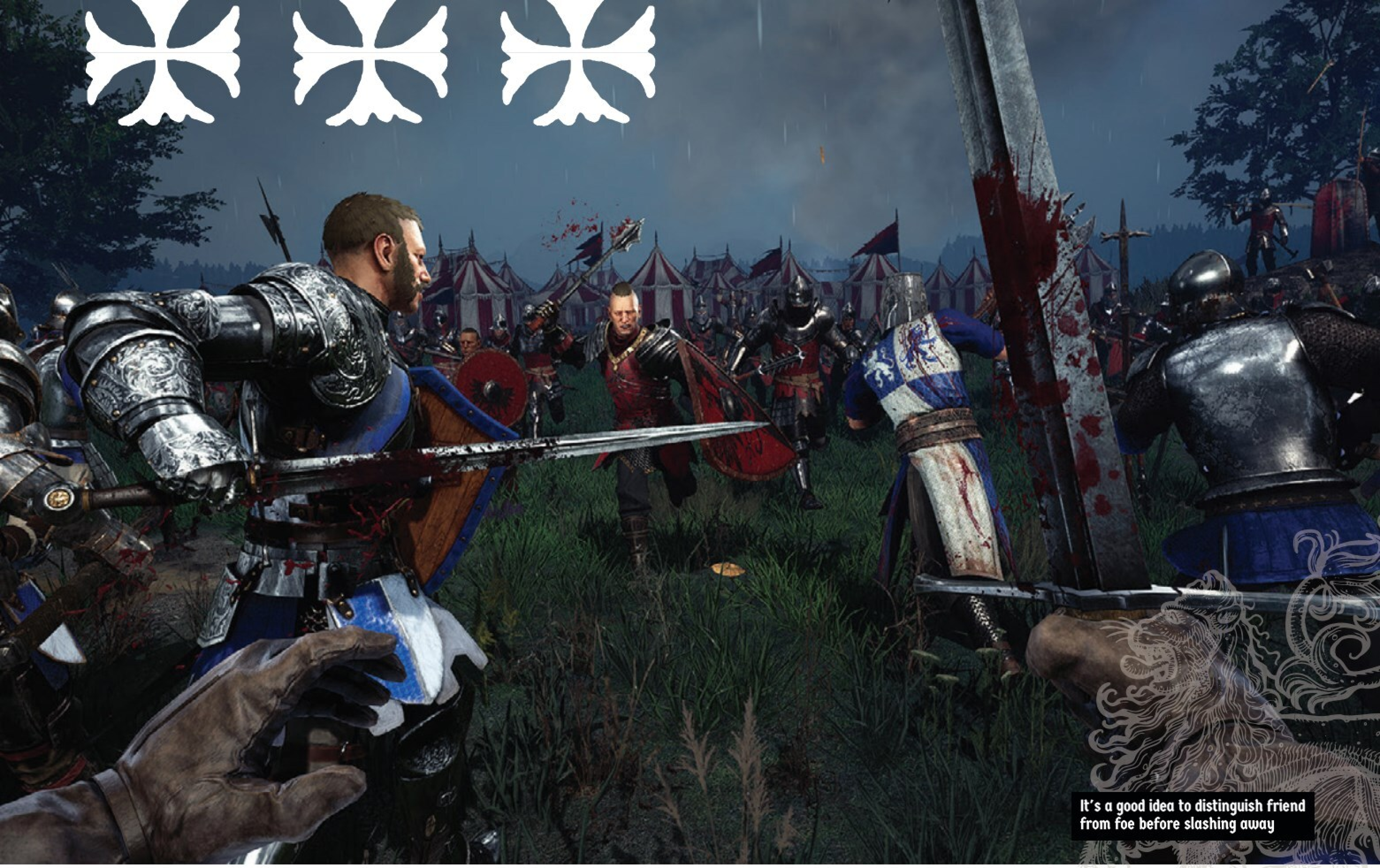


Yes, you can use those chickens in combat

One of the major differences in Chivalry 2 compared to its predecessor is the vast breadth of combat options. In the original title, you had relatively few options. You could slash, overhead, stab, and kick. In Chivalry 2, a host of new maneuvers have opened up, many of them contextual to keep the core game accessible but to offer new choices to those looking to become true battlefield dominators. You can still manage combat with just the mouse, but you'd be missing out. You can now make moves "heavy" to cleave through blocks, you can sprint attack, you can tackle people, dash, execute fast jabs, and more.

"What we've basically done is expanded the move set to enable more of the options that are included in fighting games," says studio president Steve Piggott. "So there's a lot more variety and unique moments in the combat." Instead of simply adding a ton of moves on command that would increase the complexity by dizzying degrees, Chivalry 2 puts more focus on what you can do from situation to situation. Choosing when and how to fight is crucial. Will you bide your time and wait for a dangerous opponent to engage someone else and come in from the side with a tackle or heavy swing? Will you charge the front lines screaming and slashing, ducking back for some quick healing before crashing back against the tides? Or maybe you play objectives hard, risking your limbs (literally!) to push progress for your team. Whatever you choose, you're constantly scanning the scale and scope of a congested, chaotic clash. Take chances, as you respawn back on the battleground as quickly as you left it for a fast and fluid gameflow.

If you're just getting into the game and don't know when or how to do everything, that's okay! Basic blocking and swinging can carry you through most encounters; the key is to use the more exotic fare after you've already mastered the ebb and flow of standard conflict. "Part of the power balance is what fight to get involved in matters a lot as well, so skillful players will kind of move around the battlefield a little bit different and pick their fights a little differently," says game director Rasmus Löfström. "Something that's really good about the balance is that when you're playing a five on five, or even a one on one, you can drag out fights for a really long time."



It's a good idea to distinguish friend from foe before slashing away

SHIFTING BATTLEFIELDS

As the carnage continues and the caravan moves up, the Torn Banner crew explains their philosophies on their objective-based maps. Stuff like team deathmatch is always available and going to draw a crowd, but on maps like Dark Forest, goals constantly evolve to keep the action fresh as players move through the map. If the caravan pushers are successful, the map continues to change, giving both teams new tasks and objectives at each milestone. We shatter some barricades, blow up a gate, and eventually make our way into the inner keep area, where we finally take on the duke, a VIP-style enemy that we have to slay in order to win. The duke enjoys additional hit points, a unique weapon, and a special skin. And the really cool part? The duke is controlled by a player. When the scenario shifts to the "scene" involving the duke, king, or other powerful figure, whoever is the highest-scoring player on the team gets to become that character for that pivotal piece of the war.

In other stages, perhaps there are events involving peasants, looting, and myriad other goals to diversify what's happening on the stage. "There's a lot of mechanically similar objectives to other games," says Piggott. "But our game has a huge variety of them, and they're wrapped in context." There are times where you won't be piloting your character in a traditional fashion as well, depending on what's happening in the mission. Like some sort of feudal Battlefield, you might be tapped to do some horseback riding, ballista shooting, or catapult firing outside of the standard steady slaughter.

AS YOU WISH

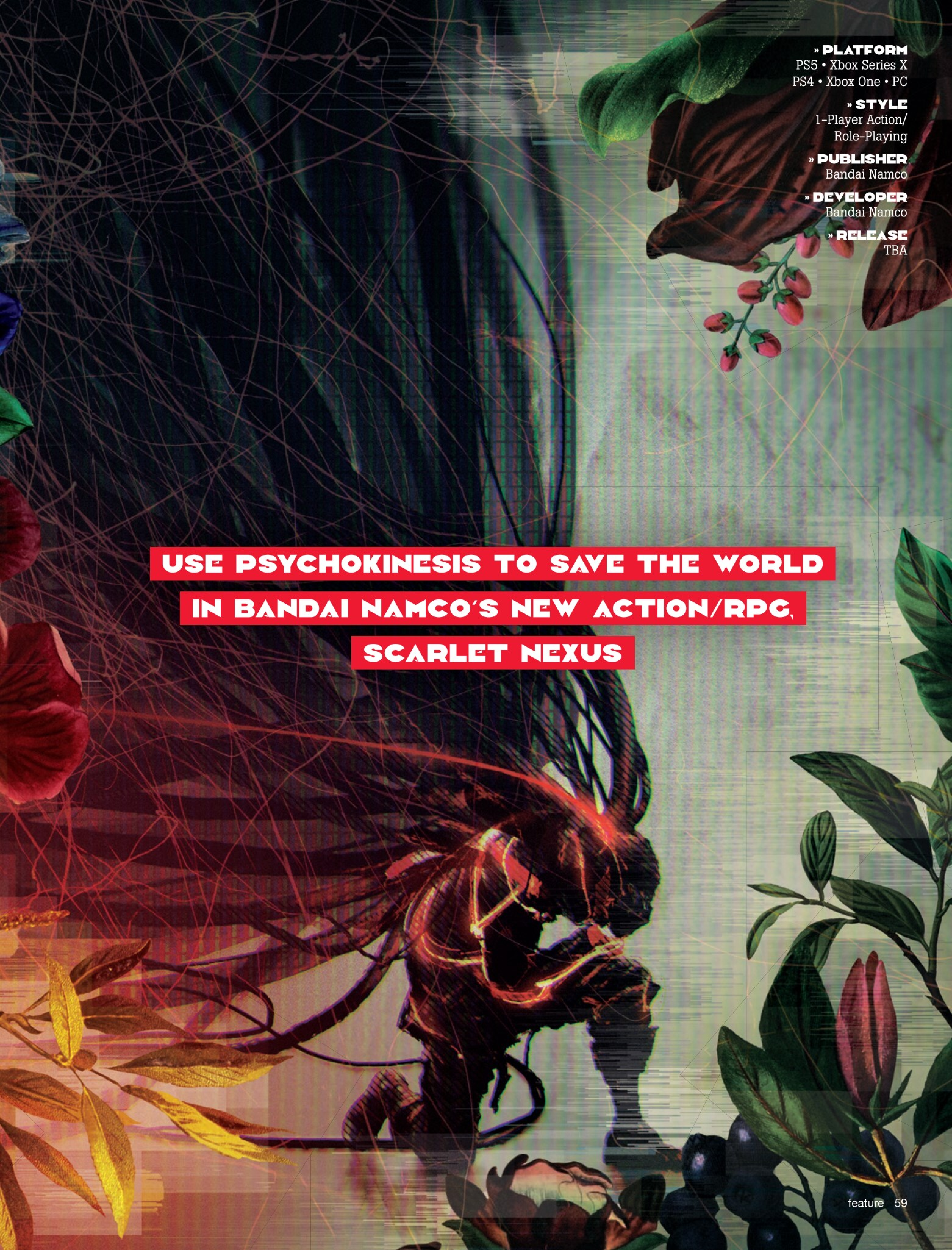
Just like the combat itself, you can take things as grim or as goofy as you like as you go from game to game, server to server. A ton of different modes exist, whether you want to just get in and start smashing skulls in team deathmatch or opt for objective-based fare, players have their own servers and standards that you can jump into as well. "There's support for custom servers and different settings that you can change," Piggott says. "It's very much meant to be, you know, take it as seriously as you want. One of the things we always say actually is that for the first game, we think about half the people that were playing were drunk the whole time. Which is great. We're totally on board with that. So, you know, people can take it as seriously as they want to or just mess around." While Piggott is joking with the comment about the potentially inebriated fanbase, as we near the end of the Dark Forest, I'm understanding the allure of this sheer cartoony cacophony, charging into battles outnumbered, screaming for the hell of it, and trying to find dumb objects in the world to use in creative takedowns.

The community has come up with its own creative ways to have fun in the world of Chivalry, like servers designed to facilitate one-on-one honorable dueling. "Over time we'll start to add more and more different rule sets and mechanics for people to explore," says Löfström. "Because really simple mechanical changes can change up how it feels to play the game. So that's something we'll look to explore and do more of post-launch."

After a grueling conflict that left shields battered, helmets shattered, and a doomed duke destroyed, the Dark Forest was over. My first scrap inside Chivalry 2 had come to an end, and I'd wager to say that I understand the attraction now. It's an entrancing and enticing mix of brutality and buffoonery, and I'm looking forward to picking up the biggest weapon I can find later this year when it comes to PC. ◆

MIND GAMES

by Kimberley Wallace



» PLATFORM
PS5 • Xbox Series X
PS4 • Xbox One • PC

» STYLE
1-Player Action/
Role-Playing

» PUBLISHER
Bandai Namco

» DEVELOPER
Bandai Namco

» RELEASE
TBA

USE PSYCHOKINESIS TO SAVE THE WORLD IN BANDAI NAMCO'S NEW ACTION/RPG, SCARLET NEXUS

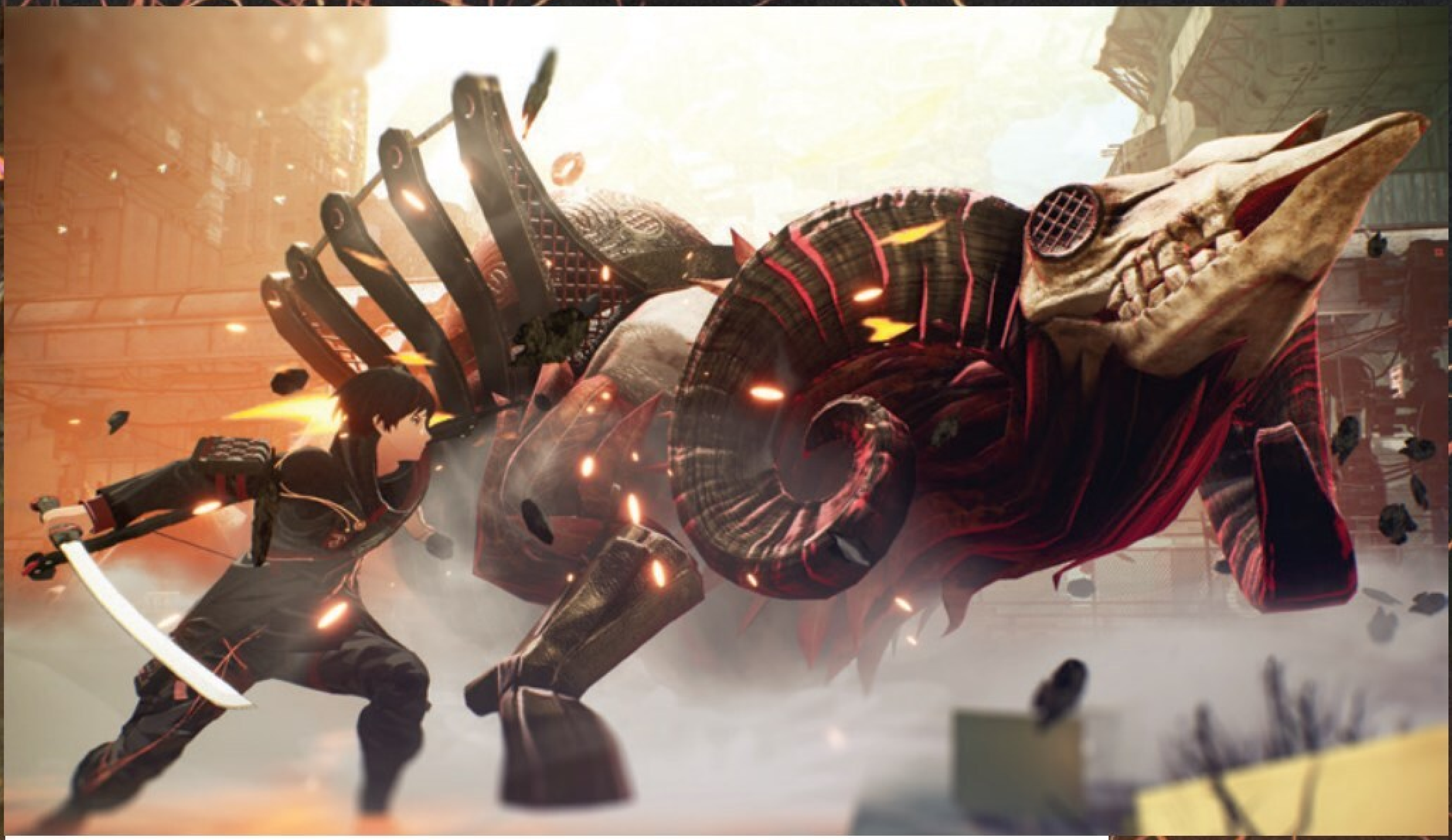
Outside of Pac-Man, Bandai Namco has made a name for itself with its anime-rooted franchises. Whether it's creating games based on popular juggernauts like Naruto and Dragon Ball or maintaining its long-running Tales series, the company has become a key player in translating anime's appeal into video games. Having this consistency has earned the company respect, but it also means Bandai Namco doesn't often develop new franchises, choosing instead to work within the confines of existing ones. New IP, like last year's Code Vein, comes sporadically. But when it does, Bandai Namco usually has full confidence and goes all-in, putting the time and care into them in hopes of building the "next big thing." During Microsoft's May Inside Xbox stream, Bandai Namco dazzled viewers with Scarlet Nexus, a new action/RPG that puts psionic powers at your fingertips. We chatted with producer Keita Iizuka to learn more about the unique project and its strange, brain-powered world.

ENHANCED INTELLECT

Our minds are powerful, but what if there was a way to heighten our abilities? For centuries, scientists have debated how much of our brain we're actually using, implying a well of untapped potential waiting to be fully realized. We've all heard the widely circulated (and easily debunked) "10 percent" figure, which states we only use a small portion of our brain in our day-to-day lives. So, what if we tapped into its full power? This has led to theories and fantasies about psychokinesis and extrasensory perception that dominate popular culture. Despite the lack of scientific evidence related to the existence of these powers, many want to believe. Just imagine if we could become experts at anything with ease, or use our mind to move objects without having to get off the couch. It's a tantalizing prospect, which is why it seems to spark so many creative endeavors.

Around four to five years ago, a group of Bandai Namco developers, mostly members from the beloved Tales of Vesperia team, sat down to envision a new concept. The director suggested focusing on a group with psychic abilities; what it evolved into was not only a prototype, but a game where elite psionics protect a futuristic Japan from brain-eating mutants. "One of the big, big motivations for choosing this sort of near-futuristic world setting is that we wanted to illustrate this psychic ability in a way that makes sense and that is far more familiar to us," Iizuka says, emphasizing that having a setting grounded in reality was a deliberate and important choice.

It's certainly different from the fantasy-driven, magic-focused Tales series, but Iizuka said he thinks fans will spot the Vesperia team's "spirit" in Scarlet Nexus. "There are no elements specifically from the Tales series that we can point to and say that we brought that into Scarlet Nexus," he says. "But I think parts of the action in battles and also having



story elements that really connect the characters together in a meaningful way is something that originates in the Tales DNA."

The importance of story and character moments are hard to convey in a trailer, especially in the action-packed reveal we saw at Microsoft's Inside Xbox presentation, but it's something Bandai Namco wants to emphasize as a core component of Scarlet Nexus. While the trailer only showed the main character, others are along for the journey. "You do actually have party members, and those will be actually revealed later, so we can't really tell you too much about it right now, " Iizuka confirms. He also says that building bonds with them will be integral to the experience. Tales of Vesperia remains one of the most beloved entries in the long-running franchise, and one of the big reasons is its likeable cast and the ways they grow together, so knowing people from that team were in the writers' room to craft these scenarios has us excited.

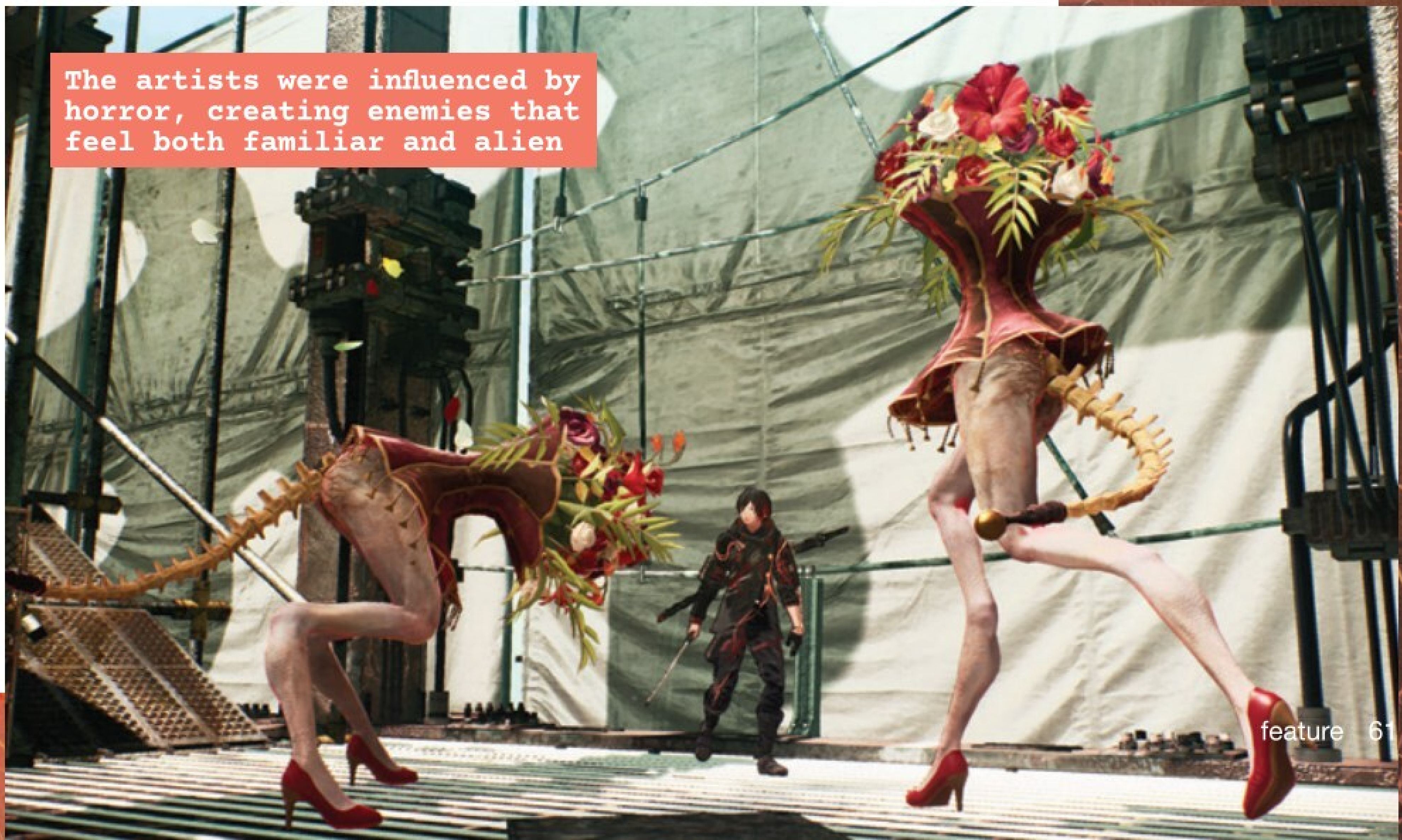
A STRANGE NEW WORLD

For now, we know players control Yuito Sumeragi, a young man striving to become an elite psionic after he was saved by one as a child. The game takes place in the fictional city of New Himuka, during an imagined future where a psionic hormone has been discovered, granting humans extra-sensory powers. "In this universe, people's brains have developed to a point where they no longer have to have any physical interaction with technological devices around them," Iizuka says, comparing it to using Alexa by merely thinking the command instead of saying it. "They can just kind of go in there and customize every speck of every device around them to their will, and they can connect with other devices, with people, and all that."

While everybody has these psionic abilities, some people are more gifted than others.

Iizuka says it's like any skill and uses the example of baseball, where not everyone who plays it is a major leaguer. However, those who are particularly talented are recruited to an elite task force called the Other Suppression Force (OSF), which was put in place to help protect the general populace from strange mutants that descended from the sky with a thirst for human brains (see The Others sidebar). "Basically, everybody looks up to [members of the OSF]. They're like the heroes of this world," Iizuka says. The members of OSF are so advanced that they don't need the help of technological devices to trigger their psionic abilities like others; they can merely direct their energy at any physical object in the world and do with it as they wish.

Yuito is a new recruit to the OSF, striving to prove his worth and master his advanced powers. "He actually comes from a very privileged background," Iizuka explains. "His family is very rich and famous. [They] have a reputation. But he's now joining the OSF as a new recruit. And so the story will be about him and his growth as a person fighting in the OSF."



The artists were influenced by horror, creating enemies that feel both familiar and alien

Meet Your Enemy: The Others

If one thing caught our attention from the reveal, it was the creative and horrifying designs of the Others. These mutants are unlike anything we've seen, but the game isn't so much about finding out why they're invading, but containing them. "Maybe not necessarily the capital-T truth is revealed, but they're studied far enough that even people who are outside of the elite forces, just ordinary people, know how to deal with them to a certain point," says producer Keita Iizuka. "They're kind of like a natural disaster or a disease - something that causes trouble in our society, but we still kind of live with it, right? They're not like this really unknown thing that nobody knows at all and we're trying to figure it now. [You're] just trying to deal with them."

When designing these unique creatures, Iizuka said the team kept coming back around to the concept of the brain and wanted to have that organ be the Others' main target - and what they ate. "We thought that was something that would sound scary for people living [in modern times]," he recalls. They're animal-like, he says, "but they may not even be animals or living … This bizarre concept of the unknown, of uncertainty, was also an inspiration. We also wanted them to be something special - something out of this world that only the psychokinetic powers could deal with."

AN ACTION/RPG AT HEART

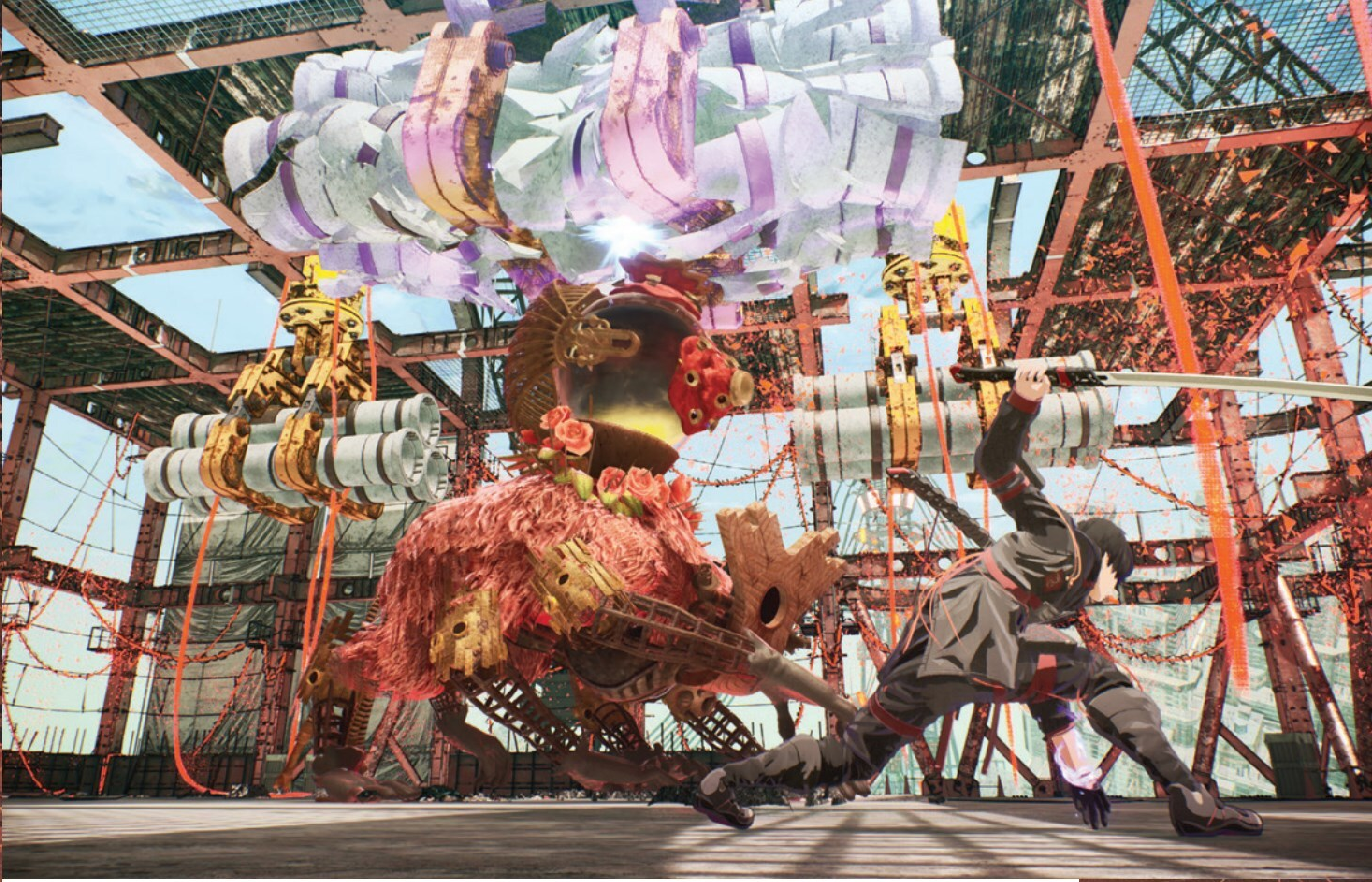
As we saw in the reveal trailer, Scarlet Nexus is packed with over-the-top action that has Yuito slicing away at strange plant-hybrid enemies and chucking objects at them to gain an advantage on the battlefield. These baddies cannot be contained merely by brute force, as they're highly resistant to conventional attack methods. Their resilience forces you to think outside of the box on how to bust them up, which could include lifting or breaking objects in the environment to synergize with your weapons. "It is a combination of close-corridor sword combat and psychokinesis combat," Iizuka says.

It looks like battles will be a delicate balance of reacting in the moment and leveraging the environment and the objects within it. "Scarlet Nexus aims to change the way gamers view Japanese RPGs with a powerful futuristic aesthetic as well as a streamlined combat system that balances fast-paced action with strategic planning," says senior brand manager Stephen Akana.

While Bandai Namco is keeping mum on many of the combat's advanced layers, it appears there may be more depth and variety than just the main character's abilities, especially in how they complement other party members. "In addition to using psychokinetic abilities in battle, there are also things that we haven't quite revealed yet," Iizuka says. There are other characters in the game that you can interact with. Yuito Sumeragi has one type of psychic ability, but then it turns out there's actually many different types of them. And so the relationships and the connection that you can make with these different psychic abilities and how they turn out in actual gameplay will be something to look out for."

The team isn't ready to go in depth on the RPG elements of the game, but did confirm that the genre standbys would be present. "We can't discuss too many details, but yes, there will be a progression system where you can level up your characters, enhance their skills, you know, things that you would see in a very fun RPG, as well [as] the other party members we talked about. You can level them up and enhance their attributes as well." When asked if we'd be controlling characters other than Yuito Sumeragi, Iizuka remained tight-lipped. "I can't comment on that, but we can tell you that there are other characters that

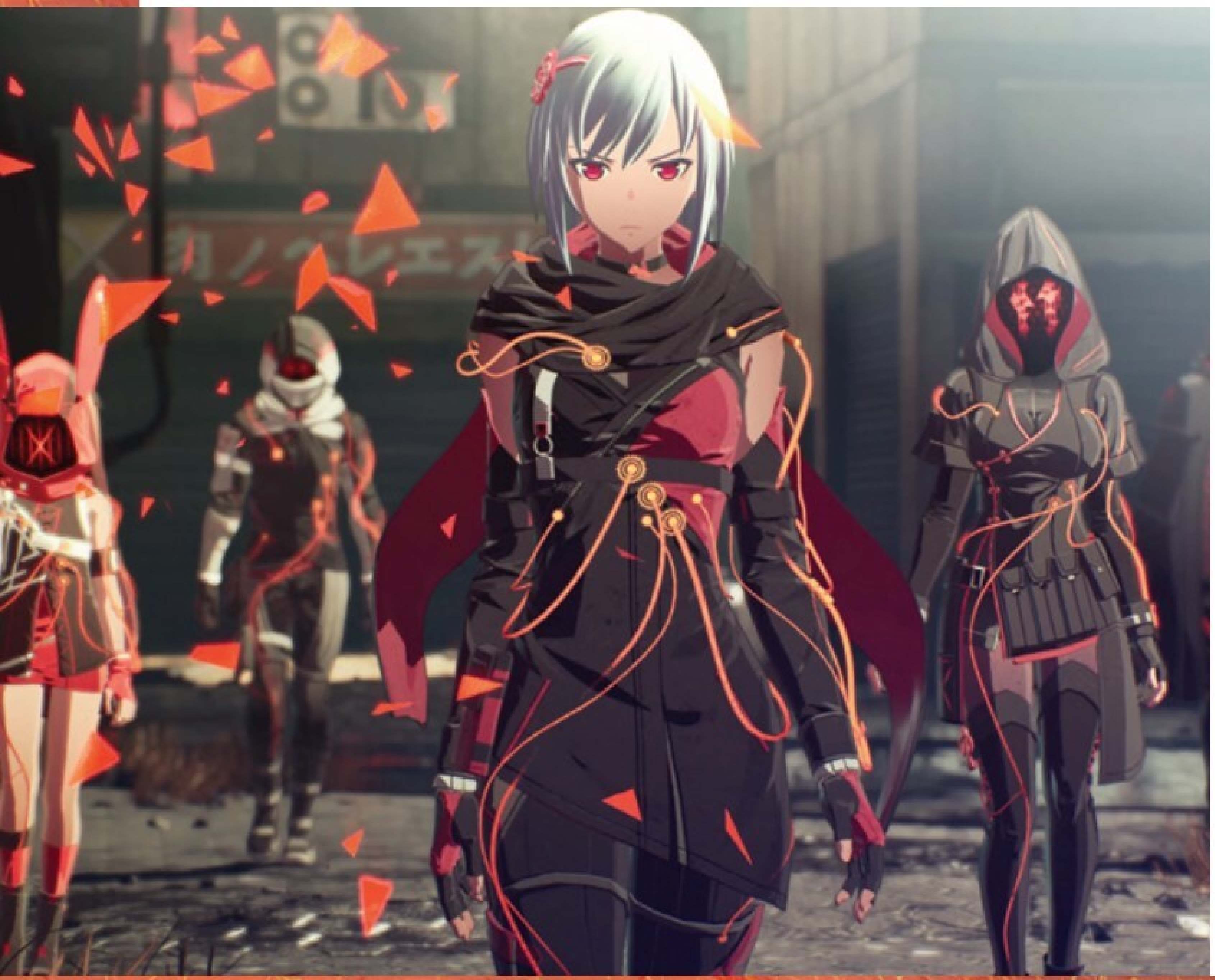
The flashy, over-the-top action makes for intense battles



have different unique abilities, and they get involved in the story." One female character was briefly teased in the announcement trailer. When asked about her role, Iizuka again couldn't say much, but did hint she has a role in the protagonist's adventure: "We can see that she is also part of the OSF and as she will come in contact with the main character."

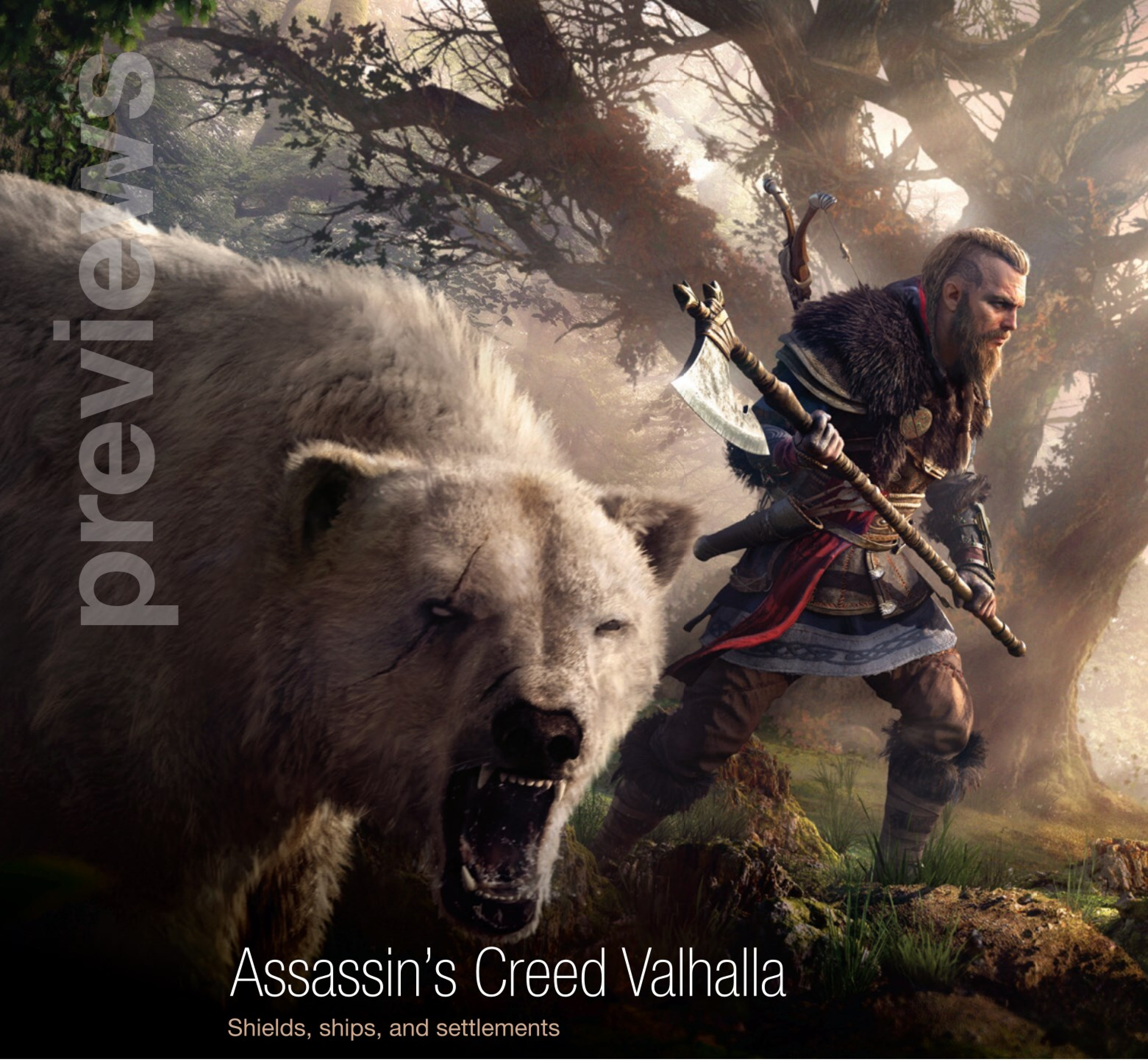
Also, Iizuka confirmed you can expect big boss battles to test your skills. "Some of these bosses are going to be gigantic versions of the Others and a lot of them are going to have different abilities and different characteristics," he says. "The fun of the game is figuring out from the abilities you have available to you how you deal with these different bosses and enemies."

As for how the game is structured, Iizuka put the action/RPG more in the linear camp than touting any open-world elements. "This is a very story-driven game. So the story is going to present different missions that you clear one after another. So I guess you can say, I'm not sure if that corresponds to a linear type. As it progresses, there's a scenario that happens in the area, and then you know something happens and you engage in a battle, and then something else happens to you, the story progresses, and you go to the next area or a scenario and combat again."



THE POWER OF THE MIND

Scarlet Nexus' trailer was an impressive first showing, but there's still a lot about the game Bandai Namco is keeping under wraps. We still need to learn more about various essential RPG components, such as the combat, progression systems, and character personalities. However, there's a lot of potential here based on the premise and interesting futuristic world Bandai Namco has created. A new IP from the company is exciting, and knowing it's from the minds behind Tales of Vesperia has us hopeful for a new franchise. Bandai Namco could use some new lifeblood in its library, and this just may be the new franchise it needs to shake things up.



Assassin's Creed Valhalla

Shields, ships, and settlements

» Platform
PS5 • Xbox Series X
PS4 • Xbox One
Stadia • PC

» Style
1-Player Action/
Role-Playing

» Publisher
Ubisoft

» Developer
Ubisoft Montreal

» Release
Holiday

Assassin's Creed is known for jumping between time periods, but not every point in history is a good fit for the series. To deliver what fans expect, the best settings contain an engaging intersection of culture, conflict, and intrigue. The newly revealed Assassin's Creed Valhalla checks those boxes and more, putting players in control of a dual-wielding Viking hero who invades the kingdoms of England during the Dark Ages.

"It's a time of war, a time of politics, a time of alliances," says creative director Ashraf Ismail. "In terms of the bread and butter of Assassin's Creed, it's a really potent time period for us to delve into the series' lore." Players experience this world through Eivor (pronounced Ā-vōr), a clan leader who finds a new home after the harsh landscape of Norway grows uninhabitable. In terms of personality, Eivor is a bit of a lone wolf, and must balance a drive for ambition against the safety and happiness of the entire clan. You choose whether your Eivor is male or female, and you can customize your hero's appearance as you progress with new hairstyles, tattoos, war paint, and gear.

Eivor raids the coastline, engages in brutal combat encounters, and builds a settlement for the Vikings. That last part is especially exciting, because it brings back a management layer that has been absent from recent Assassin's Creed titles. Not only does your settlement serve as your base, but you can expand it with new buildings, invite people to become inhabitants, and take advantage of customization features. After taking care of things on the home front, Eivor embarks on journeys out in the wider world.

Longships are an iconic part of the Viking lifestyle, and Eivor has access to one (complete with a crew) to help explore the kingdoms of England. If you see a location with resources you need for your settlement, you and your raiding party can head out to claim them by force. This means getting familiar with Valhalla's especially vicious combat. "The Viking age was really brutal," Ismail says. "We needed to deliver that; some of the key terms we were using early in the project were 'visceral,'

You can dual-wield almost any combination of weapons, but you also have a hidden blade for more subtle situations

Building a settlement for your Viking clan is a key part of the game's progression

'crunchy,' 'brutal,' 'weighty.' We wanted every swing of an axe to mean something – you can feel it. A lot of effort has gone into that sense of impact."

Eivor can dual-wield almost any combination of weapons, including axes, swords, spears, flails – and even shields. Even better, the whole gear system has been revamped compared to previous installments. "Every piece of gear you find is unique," Ismail says. "You can upgrade each piece of gear. If you wish to carry the same piece of gear to the end of the game, you can. Or if you want to collect everything, that's up to you. Everything has its own unique value. At a certain point, you can start customizing gear. So it's a new take on that RPG format in terms of gear." But your deadliness in battle isn't just what you have equipped; players gain new abilities through a reworked skill system that allows them to tailor their moveset to their playstyle.

Eivor is primarily concerned with the Vikings, but the hero also plays a part in the long war between the Assassins and Templars. Though Ubisoft isn't revealing those details yet, that conflict isn't just an afterthought in the story. "Assassin's Creed Valhalla is our push to deliver the Viking experience within the Assassin's Creed world," Ismail says. "There are two key elements there. The Viking fantasy and all of the features, systems, and narrative that need to deliver that. But also the Assassin's Creed world, the conflict between Templars and Assassins, and having [them] in the world – of course, they go by different names during this time period." One part of that ongoing story is the modern-day component, which Valhalla incorporates by continuing Layla's journey – an arc that took interesting turns in 2018's Assassin's Creed Odyssey.

Valhalla is in development at Ubisoft Montreal – the same studio behind Assassin's Creed installments like Black Flag and Origins. The team has proven talent with rich historical settings, fun naval warfare, and satisfying RPG mechanics. If all of that expertise comes together, Valhalla could provide the definitive interactive Viking experience. » **Joe Juba**

The Dark Pictures Anthology: Little Hope

Trickery and witchery

» Platform
PS4 • Xbox One • PC

» Style
1 or 2-Player Adventure

» Publisher
Bandai Namco

» Developer
Supermassive Games

» Release
Summer

Last year, Supermassive Games introduced us to the first entry in its ambitious five-game horror anthology. Man of Medan combined various genre mainstays, from a ghost ship to home invasions, to tell a story about a vacation gone terribly wrong. While it had Supermassive's popular trademarks, such as jump scares, dialogue choices, and the ability for a character to perish in a blink of an eye, it didn't generate the same buzz of the studio's acclaimed Until Dawn, even if the well-liked cooperative mode added a new dimension to the experience. Supermassive has heard all the feedback and done its best to recalibrate for the next chapter in the Dark Pictures Anthology, titled Little Hope, which centers on the 17th-century witch trials. We spoke with director and Supermassive CEO Pete Samuels to discover more about the horrors headed our way.

From the beginning, Supermassive's goal was to make each entry starkly different from the next in its Dark Pictures Anthology. Every game is standalone, focusing on fresh faces and different subgenres of horror mashed together. As such, you don't need to play Man of Medan to jump into Little Hope; think of it as a new beginning. The only thing that Man of Medan players may notice is some dialogue with The Curator will reflect what happened in their playthroughs.

Little Hope introduces you to a New England town of the same name with a horrifying past. Paranoia pervaded the settlement during the 17th-century witch trials, causing extreme punishments and heartless actions. The story explores whether the people were merely gripped by the fear of witchcraft, or if there was a dark presence manipulating the accusers … or was it the other way around? Were the accused consorting with evil? Either way, there was a lot of malice, and that has now manifested in cenobite-like demons who carry around fragments of the tortured souls of the executed.

The game takes place mostly in the present day, but it also visits two different points in the past, focusing on the townspeople during the witch trials and a family in the 1970s. Both have eerie connections to the new cast, which is a group of college students and a professor who get stranded in Little Hope after their bus crashes. The cast gets dragged back into the past as they explore the town, witnessing what leads up to the trial and executions of a group of settlers who look exactly like them. As you try to escape, you must piece together the different events, try to find the root of the evil, and discover how this group is directly connected to these people from the past.

Obviously, the plot was influenced by historical events, such as the Salem and Andover witch trials, but Samuels says not to expect a history lesson. "It's not even an adaptation to what happened then. It's our own story around some of those themes." Supermassive was really drawn to what this time period brought out in people and felt it meshed well with the type of horror they like to create. "We were talking about how our games are about people in relationships and how people can do really terrible things under extreme circumstances, and as we started to look more at it, that's effectively the real witch trials," Samuels says. "Take a group of otherwise normal people and you throw into the pot greed, selfishness, the fear of God, paranoia, and all of a sudden people are murdering each other, lying about each other, and there are executions."

Actor Will Poulter Takes The Lead

If you watched the recent trailer, you may have spotted a familiar face. Actor Will Poulter, known for his work in movies like *The Maze Runner*, *Midsommar*, and *Detroit*, plays the leading role of Andrew. Andrew is a nice guy, but kind of a loner, who finds himself having to work with others in order to find a way out of town. Poulter is the only cast member who does the voices for both his modern-day character and his 17th-century New England doppelganger. Supermassive says it cast him for his expertise and ability to perform the two different accents authentic to each historical time and place.

A new cast of university students become locked in an eerie, fog-filled town

Samuels says he then read how these trials were recounted in Arthur Miller's *The Crucible*, and "it sealed the deal" for the game's focus. He also listed acclaimed movies such as *The Witch*, *The Blair Witch Project*, *Hellraiser*, *It Follows*, *The Omen*, and *Season of The Witch* as influences. And, of course, since the students get trapped in the town by a strange fog, one video game in particular served as inspiration: Silent Hill.

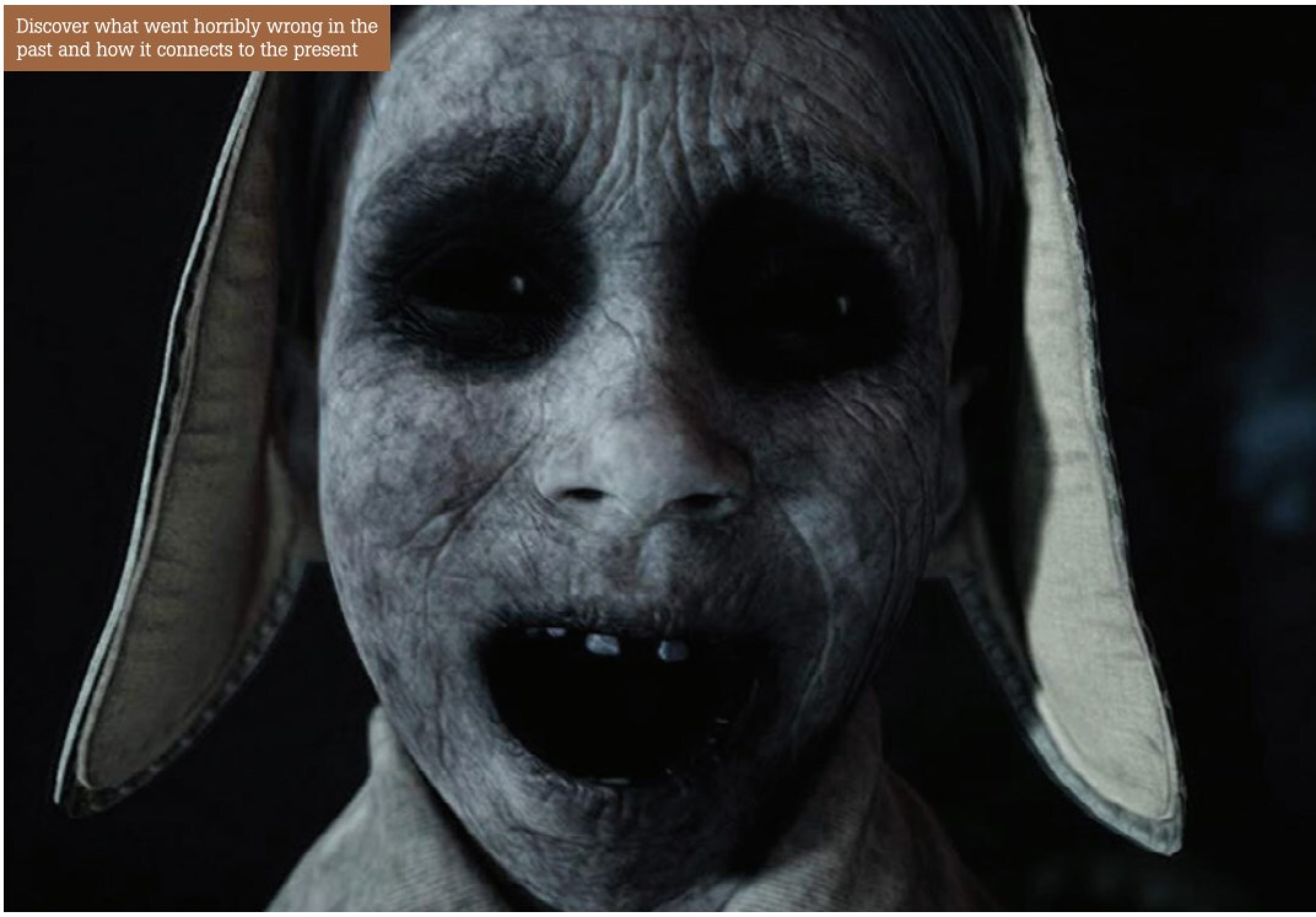
As for the core gameplay, Supermassive isn't rewriting its formula; expect a similar set up to Man of Medan, where you explore, make dialogue choices, and participate in QTEs that determine success or failure at an action. However, the team did spend time addressing some complaints from Man of Medan. Smaller things like having a greater range of walking speed and being able to click the left stick for help are now available. Animation transitions are more fluid, and the camera is no longer always fixed, making for more natural exploration. "Fixed cameras do so much for us in terms of cinematic quality and in horror of making the statement of, 'You can only see what we want you to see,' but then in some situations, particularly in exploration, we don't need to constrain the view of the player in that way," Samuels explains. "It actually does work really well to [have a] camera closer to the character with more control over it for the player. That's something that will strengthen the anthology going forward – that we're getting diversified in [camera types]."

Perhaps, though, the biggest adjustment was to QTEs and alerting the player so they can brace for them. A lot of people felt the QTEs were too difficult and abrupt in Man of Medan, making them often lose characters they didn't want to. "There's a large part of the audience that really enjoys that, and that's why they play; the weight is part of the tension, to know you have to react quickly," Samuels says. "Rather than just make them all easy, which would have been a huge mistake, we decided that actually the real issue was lack of warning."

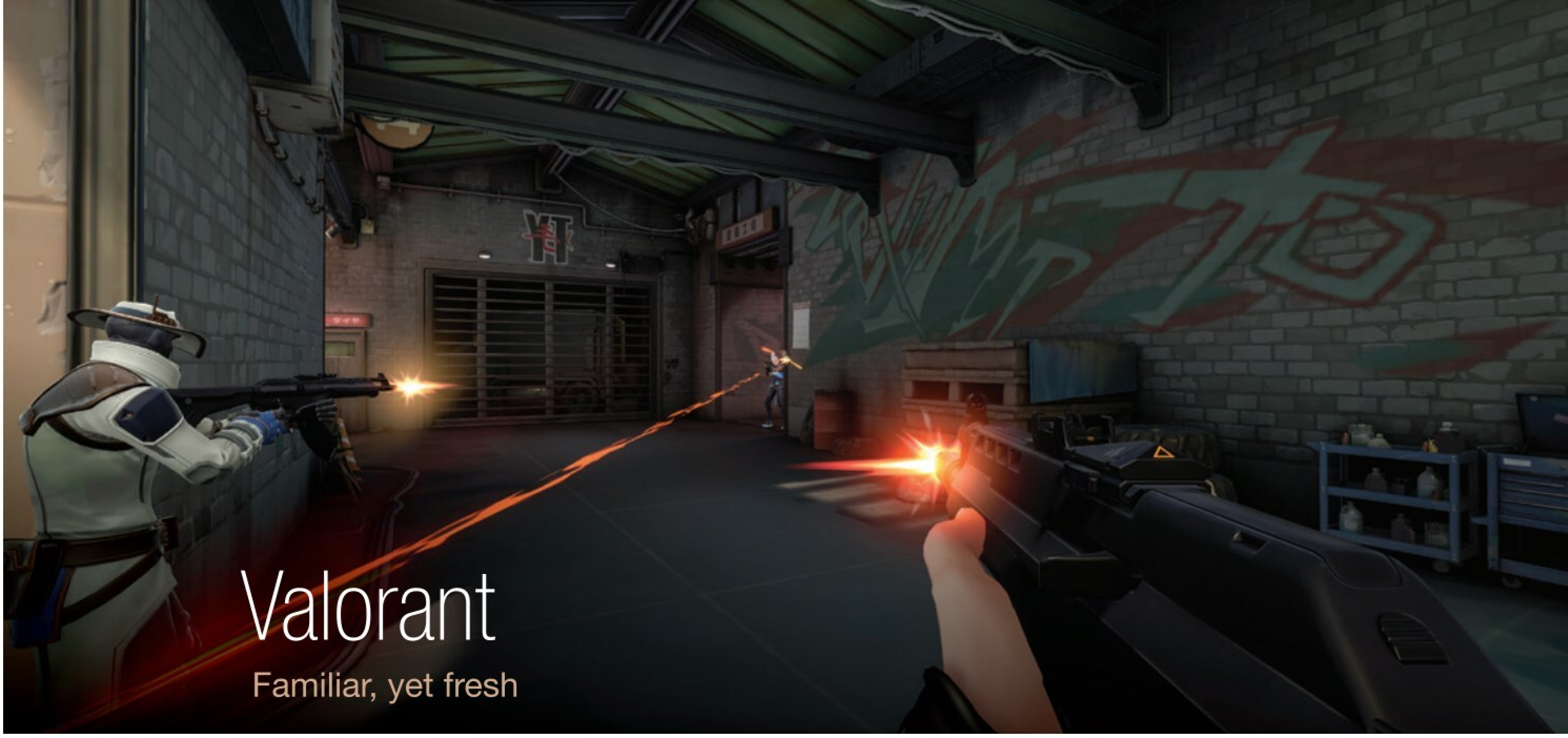
The UI now alerts you something is going to happen soon, and Samuels said the team developed a system of icons to not only instruct you when you do something but also let you know what it will cause. "We felt like hitting a button and then seeing what a character does is less satisfying than knowing you're hitting a button to make a character jump, duck, dodge, or whatever the effect of that is going to be," he says. And if you thought QTEs drove way too many of the branching paths in Man of Medan, you'll be happy to know that Supermassive worked for a better balance between them and your dialogue choices determining story outcomes.

With a new chilling setting, the return of multiplayer, and various gameplay tweaks, Little Hope looks promising so far. Time will tell what terrors and surprises surround the town of Little Hope, but here's hoping it leaves a bigger impression than its predecessor.

» **Kimberley Wallace**



Discover what went horribly wrong in the past and how it connects to the present



Valorant

Familiar, yet fresh

» **Platform**
PC

» **Style**
10-Player
Online Shooter

» **Publisher**
Riot Games

» **Developer**
Riot Games

» **Release**
Summer

For perspective, you should know I'm not a pro player or a gaming god – my take on Valorant so far may be vastly different from the high-tier analysis that you may find from those sources. That said, I spent a significant amount of time playing Counter-Strike at a LAN center, which happens to be highly relevant toward my enjoyment of Valorant.

Why? Because Valorant has real roots in Counter-Strike; much of the shooting, features, mechanics, and weapons have incredibly similar counterparts. If Valorant and CS are baked goods, the core recipe is essentially the same – but the sprinkles on top of the Valorant cake are a different color. The bright neon confectionery may set Valorant up to take over the tactical-shooter space as it moves into open beta and beyond.

Everything that defines Counter-Strike is here, with a layer on top that arguably makes Valorant more interesting and varied from round to round, and also probably way more watchable, allowing players to set up "big plays" with high-skill-cap abilities that make for the esports equivalent of a Hail Mary pass or a fake punt. While witnessing amazing skill in CS is great, there's a little more punch behind the splashy and flashy ultimates in Valorant. It's actually kind of ridiculous just how much Counter-Strike DNA is in Valorant, but this presents an awesome skeleton to flesh out with some bold new features.

At the core, it's about the guns. You have all kinds of glittery and fun accent abilities that have a huge impact on the game, but knowing what to buy and how to use it is essential regardless of the character you select. Unlike other hero-based shooters, weapons are not specific to a character, so you have the same SMGs, sniper rifles, shotguns, and sidearms available for your entire roster.

Hero abilities tend to create situations that allow you to use your firearms more effectively by obscuring enemy vision, cutting off access routes, or providing valuable information about where the opposition is located. Ultimate abilities are incredibly powerful, and can turn the tide of an entire match, allowing superpowers like resurrection and blasts that fire through walls. To charge your ultimates, you have to get kills or risk going after small black orbs scattered at high conflict areas in each map. This lets you formulate a strategy even if you're not great at racking up killstreaks; you can chase the orbs to power up your big play.

Graphically, Valorant is not doing it for me. I do love that less of a focus on the visuals ostensibly makes it run super smooth on just about any rig out there, and in a game like this, functionality is way more important than flavor. I want my sniper rifle to connect when I fire it without any stuttering, so I'm okay with sacrificing some graphical eye candy for it. This extends to the characters. While I enjoy the creativity in some of their abilities, their actual personalities are forgettable and bland.

Valorant is still in early beta, with more maps, characters, and tweaks to come, so I'm nowhere close to anything resembling a final verdict. I'm enjoying my time with it so far (an affinity for Counter-Strike goes a long way for this one), but we'll have to wait and see how things shake out on the way to a summer launch. » **Daniel Tack**

Torchlight III

A place to call home

The path to Torchlight III hasn't exactly been simple. Starting out as the free-to-play MMO Torchlight Frontiers, developer Echtra Games shifted to a traditional pay model following player feedback and concerns about the direction the game was taking. According to studio founder and CEO Max Schaefer, this recalibration has ultimately made the game better. "We realized that we could keep all of the cool stuff that we were doing and then add all the cool stuff that Torchlight, at its roots, was," he says. "We didn't really have to compromise at all."

One of the most notable features that may not have otherwise made it into Torchlight III is the introduction of forts. These player spaces serve several important purposes – the obvious being that players have a space within the game to call their own. As they continue their adventures, killing bosses and scouring the world of evil, they return and funnel precious resources into improving their fort. For example, players can plant a luck tree, which can be fed with magic items. This levels up the tree, giving players a permanent bonus to item-finding. "Someone else can come by and use my luck tree and get a temporary buff, like a shrine basically," Schaefer says. "You can use someone else's enchanting table and you can use their recipes. There's lots of stuff there that makes it a useful place, not only for you and your account, but it also makes it relevant for other people who are playing the game as well."

The forts also address one of the larger existential questions that the studio has clearly spent a lot of time thinking about. "What are you in the game?" Schaefer asks. "Are you your character? Are you all your characters collectively? Or do you put one away and now you're the next character. It feels weird to be part of this world but just be this character who flits in and out every now and then. We thought it would be really cool to actually give you a piece of real estate in the world that matters."

Schaefer says the idea was inspired, in some way, by Ultima Online, which allowed players to buy their own homes and feel as though they had some skin in the game. "We wanted to capture a little of that and get you feeling like you're not just a character in the world but you're a part of this world. And we also wanted to reinforce the notion that you are really your account more than you are any individual character, because we want you to make multiple characters."

I've been playing the beta, and the introduction of forts definitely adds an appealing new facet to the dungeon grind. Ordinarily, you'd head back to town after clearing an area to sell and upgrade gear, and take on new quests. It's a tried-and-true routine, but it does feel like you're living out of a suitcase. Having a home base of sorts is pretty cool, and I loved watching it slowly grow over time. I can also see it being an appealing opportunity for player expression, since you're able to decorate your space with a variety of different furnishings – including rare and legendary cosmetics that drop during your adventures.

The added possibility of seeing strangers show up in your fort is a new wrinkle on Torchlight, but in a good way. "I really think we're getting the benefits of the MMO world in the original MMO-y designs we had," Shaefer says. "I feel that the cool part of that has been preserved." » **Jeff Cork**

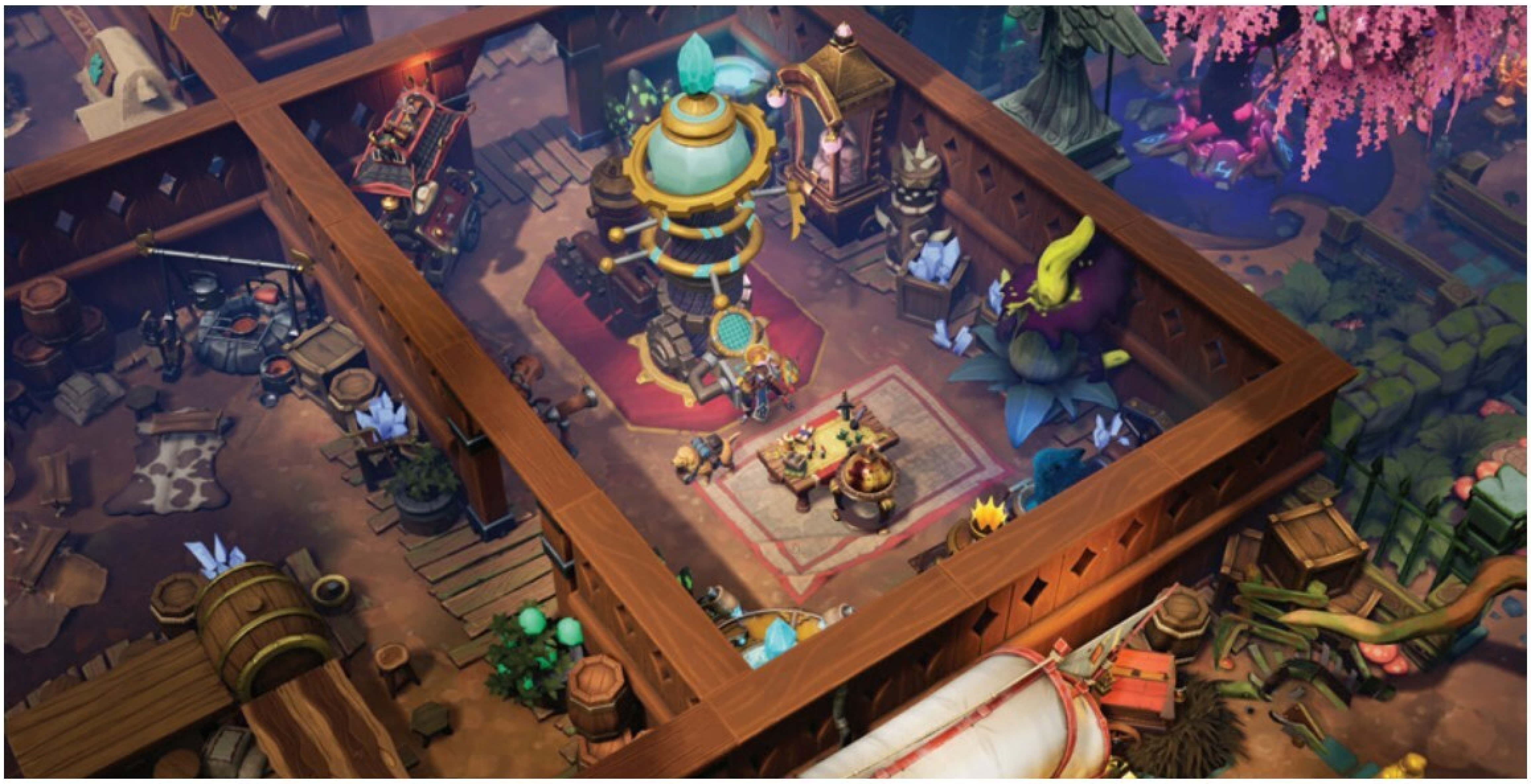
» Platform
PC

» Style
1-Player Action/
Role-Playing
(2 to 4-Player Online)

» Publisher
Perfect World
Entertainment

» Developer
Echtra Games

» Release
2020



Tony Hawk's Pro Skater 1 & 2

Return to the halfpipe

» **Platform**
PS4 • Xbox One
PC • Mac

» **Style**
1 or 2-Player Sports

» **Publisher**
Activision

» **Developer**
Vicarious Visions

» **Release**
September 4

Activision's recent success of restoring Crash Bandicoot, Crash Team Racing, and Spyro the Dragon will hopefully continue with Tony Hawk's Pro Skater 1 and 2, classics that originally appeared on PlayStation in 1999 and 2000, respectively. Developed by Neversoft, Tony Hawk's Pro Skater changed the world of gaming and gave way to an entire subgenre of sports titles, from more "pro" titles by Activision about BMX and surfing, to the SSX series and rival games like EA's Skate.

This isn't the first time Activision has tried to bring the fire back to the Tony Hawk gaming brand. In 2012, developer Robomodo released Tony Hawk's Pro Skater HD on Xbox 360, PlayStation 3, and PC, and it wasn't warmly received, being viewed as a step down from the original games both in technical performance and the vision of the new content. Activision again partnered with Robomodo for 2015's Tony Hawk's Pro Skater 5, which was so bad, it appeared to be the final nail in the coffin for the Tony Hawk games.

After a five-year hiatus, Activision is trying again, this time enlisting the development talents of Vicarious Visions, the studio behind the Crash Bandicoot remakes. Similar to those restorations, Vicarious is preserving what came before as best it can, while adding a new coat of paint to both Tony Hawk's Pro Skater 1 and 2. The games will be bundled together and released for PlayStation 4, Xbox One, Mac, and PC through the Epic Games Store.

While the career paths from both games are still independent and push players to complete the same goals, the skills earned by the individual skaters are shared between both games, meaning you could get a bit of an edge out of the gates if you continue using the same skater from game one to two.

All of the original skaters from these games are returning and have been updated to their current likenesses. This lineup consists of Tony Hawk, Bucky Lasek, Bob Burnquist, Elissa Steamer, Steve Caballero, Andrew Reynolds, Geoff Rowley, Kareem Campbell, Chad Muska, and more. When asked about secret skaters such as Tony Hawk Pro Skater 2's Spider-Man, Vicarious Visions didn't provide a direct answer, and implied we'd have to wait to see what the secrets in the remaster will be. There will be more secrets added overall, however, so that's promising.

The soundtrack will bring back many of the songs from the original games, but not all of them. Which tracks have been omitted is also unknown at this time. According to the trailer, Bad Religion, Dead Kennedys, Powerman 5000, Goldfinger, Millencolin, Naughty by Nature, Papa Roach, Primus, Rage Against the Machine, and Lagwagon are still incorporated in some capacity, whether through the familiar tracks or new ones.

All of the skating action unfolds at 60 frames-per-second across all the iconic stages we used to create ridiculous combos back in the day, including the Warehouse. While you may be chasing many of the same objectives in these stages, you will have an expanded arsenal of tricks to perform, whether it's aerial maneuvers, lip tricks, or manuals.

Online multiplayer returns and again invites players to challenge each other in Graffiti and Scoring Challenge modes. Players can also dive into Create-a-Park (which debuted in Pro Skater 2) to build robust parks that can be shared with friends online. Vicarious says the creation tools offer more options than the original game, and can even remix already-published parks.

We don't have long to wait to return to Tony Hawk's Pro Skater 1 and 2. Activision is eyeing a September 4 launch date for all of the versions.
» **Andrew Reiner**

Skater XL

Putting together a good run

A skateboarding game needs to be as simple as, "See rail; do trick on rail." Boiling everything down to this essence, however, isn't as easy as it sounds. Controls, objectives, and the other structures we rely on as gamers can get in the way, even if they're necessary. Skater XL from Easy Day Studios is trying to bridge the gap, letting players pull off the tricks they dream up without being hampered by its own controls. We've been watching the game's progress through development, and with its July release on the horizon, it looks like its freeform philosophy is intact and guiding the game well.

We looked at the new Easy Day Academy, which is both an introduction to the world (including tutorials) as well as a great level. It's a sprawling campus containing the greatest hits of southern California school design – or at least as we imagine it as skaters. Concrete banks, benches, planters, rails, bike racks, and stairs are all in abundance, and the spawn-drop tool is handy if you want to explore a spot more out-of-reach, like the top of the school.

Skater XL's downtown L.A. environment contains its own runs and possibilities, from the plazas around the Staples Center to the possibilities of Koreatown. Overall, downtown's skateable objects are more compact than the academy, representing a more real-world street skating geography. At the time of this writing, Easy Day hinted at as-yet-unannounced locations which represent different aspects of skating beyond just street, so perhaps we'll see the inclusion of plywood or concrete pool parks.

Although these areas are not physically linked to each other, each one includes challenges and objectives that serve as nominal guides, showing off cool lines and some of what the environment has to offer. Nevertheless, all of the locations are unlocked from the beginning.

Easy Day has continued to layer on more tricks as well as new structures to do them on. Powerslides and reverts were added this year, and mini-ramps and vert will be included. The team has also added coping grinds – seamless grinds you transition to on a ramp without having to ollie.

The latter is an example of how the game's tricks, animations, and level design come together to create skating that flows together. Although the controls (each foot is represented by an analog stick) seem daunting at first, the game is not as strict about its trick execution as Skate (where a trick demands a specific series of inputs), but controlling your legs and manipulating your board isn't physics run amok. Speaking of which, your skater's overall body seems to have more weight compared to earlier demos. This makes your body less bouncy when biffing on a rail, for instance.

The game has also made strides in its customization options. First and foremost, real-life skaters Tiago Lemos, Brandon Westgate, Tom Asta, and Evan Smith are playable (with more possible in the future), and they come with a few of their actual product sponsorships. While some of their real-life gear is locked to them, other gear can be used by any skater. At the time of this writing, Easy Day says it has a large roster of skate brands, including DC shoes, Element, Primitive, Blind, Independent, and many more, and overall you can select your skater's gender, hair style, outfits, grip tape, wheels, skin tone, and more.

The pre-release modding coomunity has taken skater customization into its own hands with a number of fan-made creations, but whether the final release actually uses mods (which is complicated on home consoles) remains an open question. So far, modders have greatly expanded the game by creating their own skate spots, among many other additions, so getting some percentage of the current 15,000-plus mods in the final product would be a big win.

The crucial question of mods is underscored by the fact that currently the game's online multiplayer is possible thanks to a mod. Easy Day has been in contact with its creators, and it may use the mod for multiplayer until Easy Day implements its own offering at a later date. For the game as a whole, the studio is weighing several post-release plans, and stresses that it wants to add free content first, before the possibility of paid packs.

Skaters make pulling off tricks look easy, but it's not effortless, and making a skating game is a harder task still. Starting with an understandable and fluid control scheme, Easy Day has surrounded its core gameplay with level designs filled with trick possibilities and customization elements to further augment players' creativity. If the latter is infinitely boosted by mod support, Skater XL could be a canvas for untold possibilities. » **Matthew Kato**

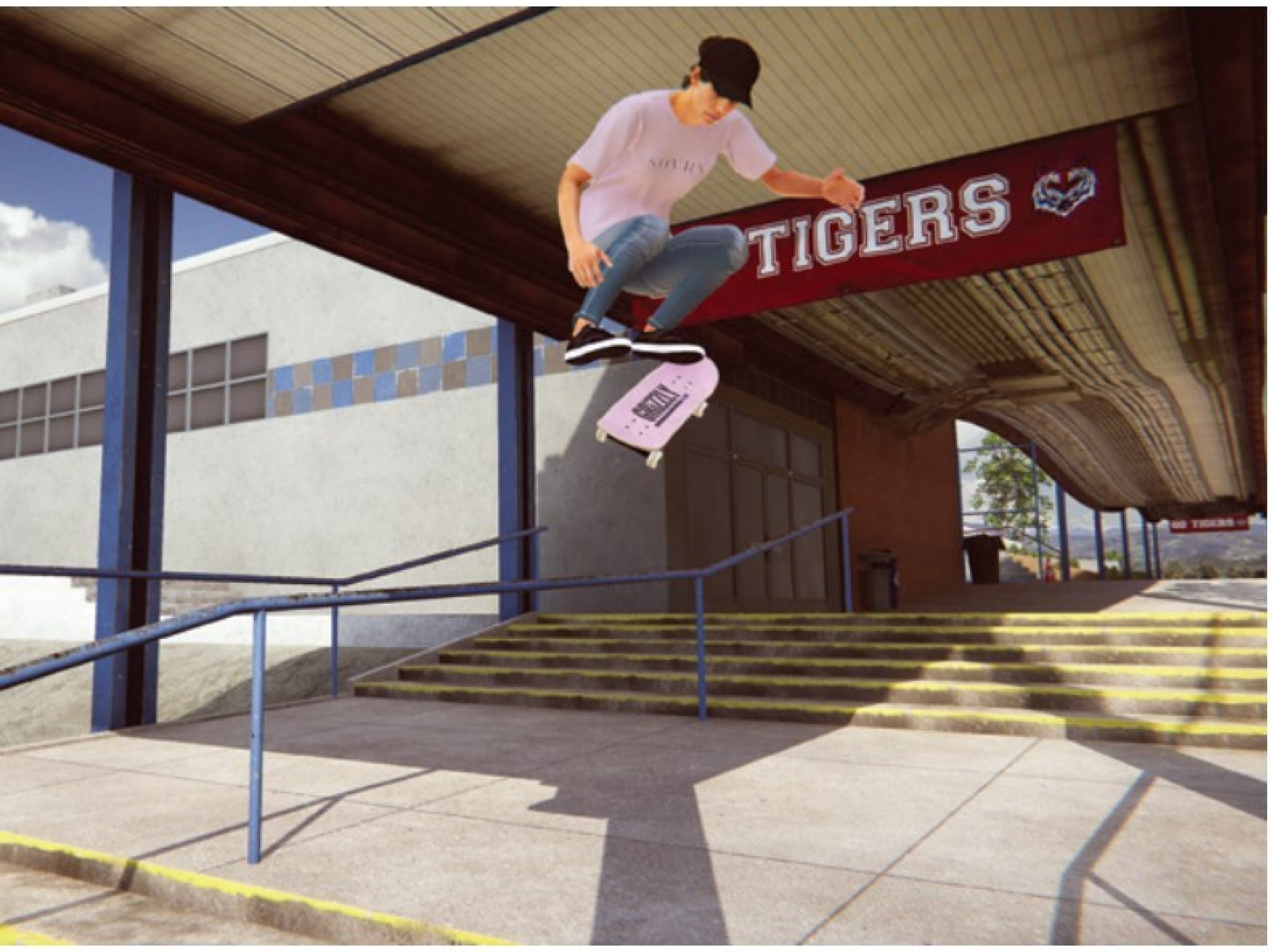
» Platform
PS4 • Xbox One
Switch • PC

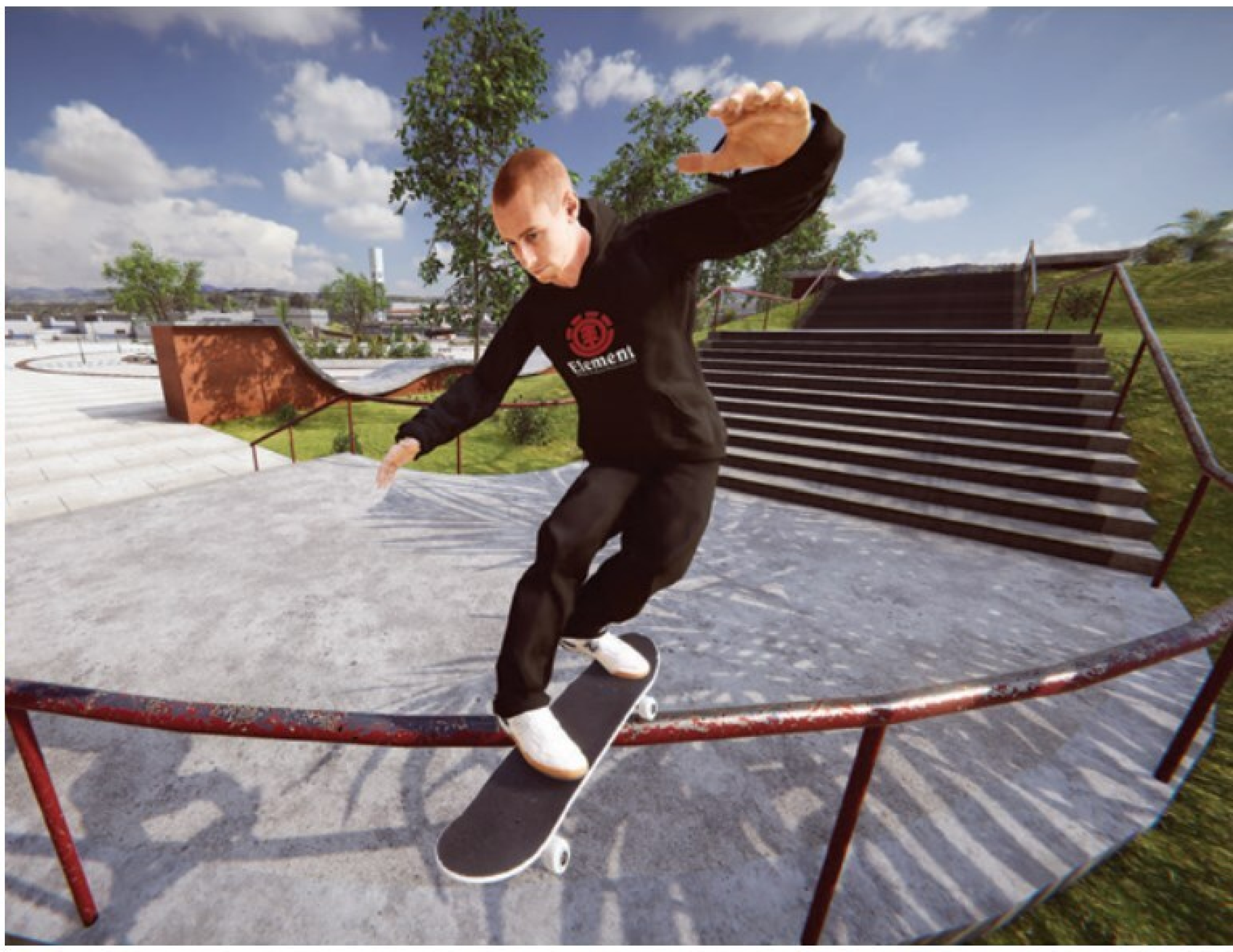
» Style
1-Player Sports
(Online TBD)

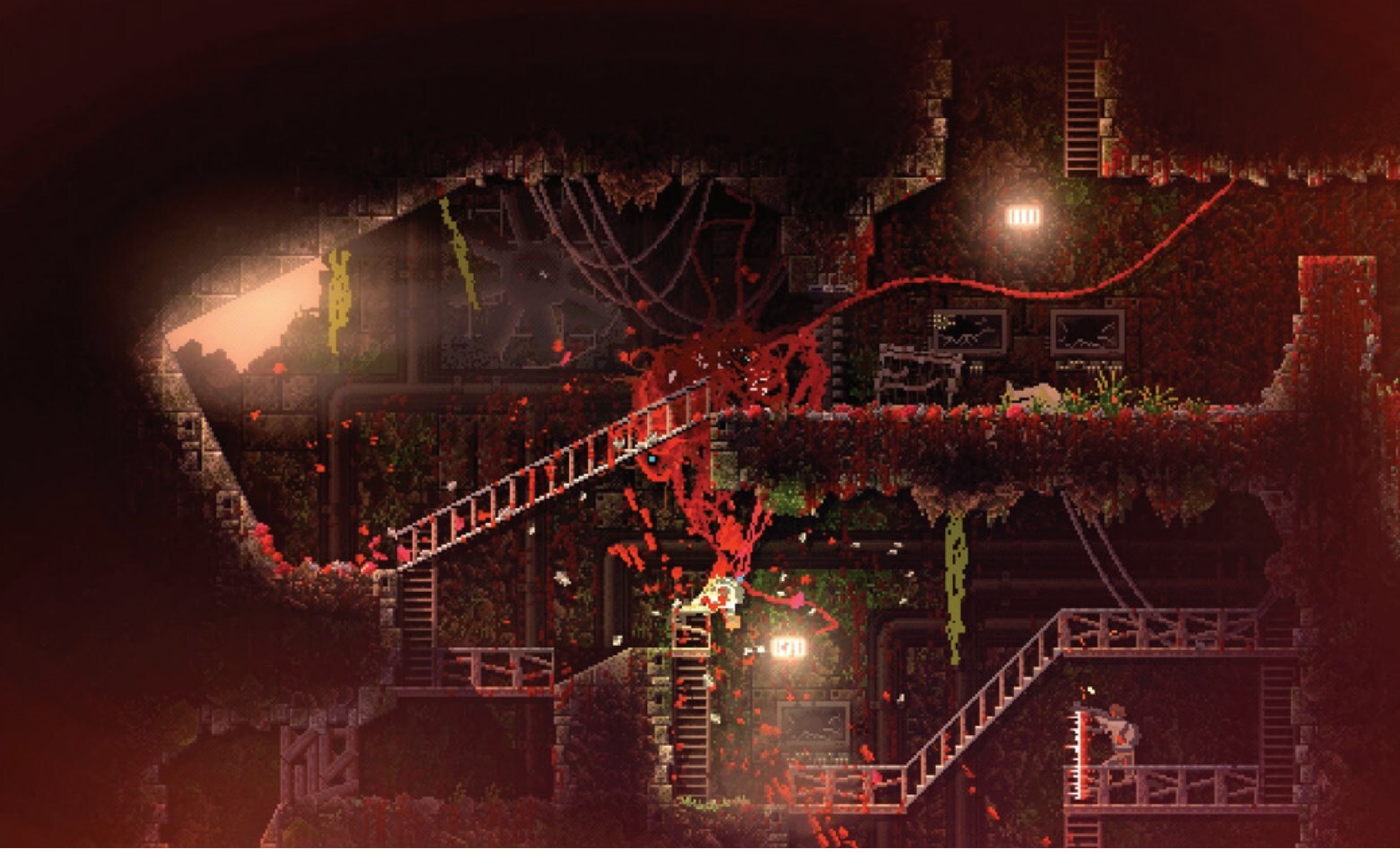
» Publisher
Easy Day Studios

» Developer
Easy Day Studios

» Release
July 7







Carrion

Be the monster

» Platform
Xbox One • PC

» Style
1-Player Action

» Publisher
Phobia Studio

» Developer
Phobia Studio

» Release
Summer

The first three letters of "Carrion" are same as a popular Marvel comic-book character named Carnage, and it's hard to believe it's just a coincidence. With a writhing, red, tentacled biomass that devours people as the main character, the comparison is hard to dismiss. Developer Phobia has billed its unusual project as a reverse horror experience – and that's certainly fair – but it's also an experiment in doing something different with the action and exploration vibe of a 2D Metroid-style game. Instead of a stalwart space hero, you are an experiment gone horribly wrong, ripping through every human you encounter with gnashing teeth and an insatiable hunger.

In the several hours I played of an early version, I was struck by the genuinely disturbing nature of the gameplay. The creature you inhabit oozes and tears through the corridors it passes, with individual appendages squelching as it pulls itself along from one place to the next. The mostly hapless humans you encounter are genuinely terrified and scream even as you pick them up, only quieting after they are dismembered and devoured. The creature gains new powers over the course of exploration, like the capability to shoot out narrow web shots that snare distant door levers, or the power to transform into a mass of worms that can pass through barred gates. At one point, it gains the ability to briefly turn invisible, leading to moments where you're hanging above a helpless victim, with them none the wiser that a giant beast is about to end them.

The mechanism for how the game handles movement is both smooth and impressive. As you grow, the monster you're controlling takes up a significant amount of space on the screen, but I never felt cumbersome or clumsy. The creature has a constant sense of pulsing undulation. In certain areas, you are forced to deposit a portion of your mass as a detached and immobile cocoon, shrinking in health and size to enable abilities and passage unavailable to the larger version. In other areas, you squeeze yourself into a tiny crack and infect a whole section of the research facility, spreading out a type of nest that doubles as a save point.

The foolish humans who once tried to imprison you eventually start taking precautions, and life as a nightmare beast gets a bit trickier. Personnel may be armed, and they pick away at your health if you don't move quickly enough to eliminate them. More capable security forces carry energized body shields that deflect tentacles, demanding you find a path to get behind them. And non-organic drones are eventually deployed, leaving none of the juicy body parts to eat and heal from after an encounter.

The version I played offered an intriguing world to explore, with only contextual hints scattered around to help piece together what was actually happening in this vast underground lab. I enjoyed constricting into the various tight passages and waterways that offered ingress into a new area, but my demo build didn't have a map, which is a feature I hope Phobia decides to add as development continues. An occasional sense of aimlessness and feeling lost in similar-looking rooms held back some of the aggressive monster fantasy from its full potential.

Even so, this was a surprising and entertaining new twist on a particularly well-trodden genre. If you have the stomach for the horrified screams of your victims, it's a bloody twist on the horror formula that has the potential to keep you up at night. » **Matt Miller**

Disintegration

A war on two fronts

Originally a real-time strategy game, the sci-fi shooter Disintegration once looked completely different from its current form. However, Halo co-creator and V1 Interactive founder Marcus Lehto was unhappy with how similar it looked and felt to other games in the RTS genre, so he and his small team began experimenting with ways to turn the typical RTS camera into an active participant in battles. The result is a unique game that combines the formula of the first-person shooter genre Lehto helped revolutionize while at Bungie with the RTS genre he was initially interested in.

» Platform
PS4 • Xbox One • PC

» Style
1-Player Shooter
(10-Player Online)

» Publisher
Private Division

» Developer
V1 Interactive

» Release
June 16

In this role of the active-participant RTS camera, you control accomplished pilot Romer Shoal as he soars over the battlefield in a futuristic gravcycle, blasting enemies from afar and giving commands to his squad. You can mark targets of interest and activate squad members' abilities, which range from mortars and concussion grenades to slow fields as you work to rebel against the Rayonne, robotic overlords working to wipe out humanity. As you're giving your squad orders in single-player, time slows down to allow you to minimize the impact of taking your time in the menu. You can also mark points of interest like health-regen points to replenish your squad's HP.

As you go through the single-player campaign, you fight in locations like the Rocky Mountains, deserted human towns, industrial complexes, dense cities, and arid deserts where Rayonne forces are setting up construction sites to build ships. The gameplay footage I'm shown showcases a dense city zone. The Rayonne comb through the area, but thanks to a new marksman-rifle upgrade, as well as masterful commanding of the ground units and their abilities, the person running the demo glides through the mission with relative ease.

Lehto expects the single-player campaign to last between 8 and 10 hours on regular difficulty, but those who opt for the higher difficulties will likely take more than 15 hours to complete the game. "It's not overwhelmingly huge by any means, but it's within a 30-person team to build something within scope," Lehto says. "It's fairly reasonable, but substantial enough. It's really satisfying, and it's got a nice beginning, middle, and end to it. It's a nice rollercoaster ride that it takes you through. We feel like we hit a nice spot for length."

If you're looking to take your skills online, you can also battle it out in objective-based 5v5 online multiplayer matches. These battles pit two teams of five human gravcycle pilots and their associated minions against one another, leading to battles that feel larger than just 10 total players. With different classes and weapons to experiment with, the online multiplayer suite could lend itself to experimentation with your preferred playstyle. However, don't take the time-slowing feature in single-player for granted; the battlefield continues in real time as you navigate your command lists during multiplayer matches.

Each successive look at Disintegration has given us more reason to be excited. While I enjoyed my time with the multiplayer beta in January, the single-player footage is impressive and the concepts are intriguing, but the proof will be in how it all comes together when it launches in June.
» Brian Shea

NASCAR Heat 5

Pit stop adjustments

» Platform
PS4 • Xbox One
Switch • PC

» Style
1 or 2-Player Racing
(40-Player Online)

» Publisher
Motorsport Games

» Developer
704Games

» Release
July 10

The NASCAR Heat franchise is going through big changes, affecting this year's game as well as the course of the series' future. Established developer Monster Games is no longer developing the series. Former publisher 704Games is now making the game itself, with new company Motorsport Games taking over as publisher. Motorsport is based in the U.K., and includes former Codemasters veterans among its ranks.

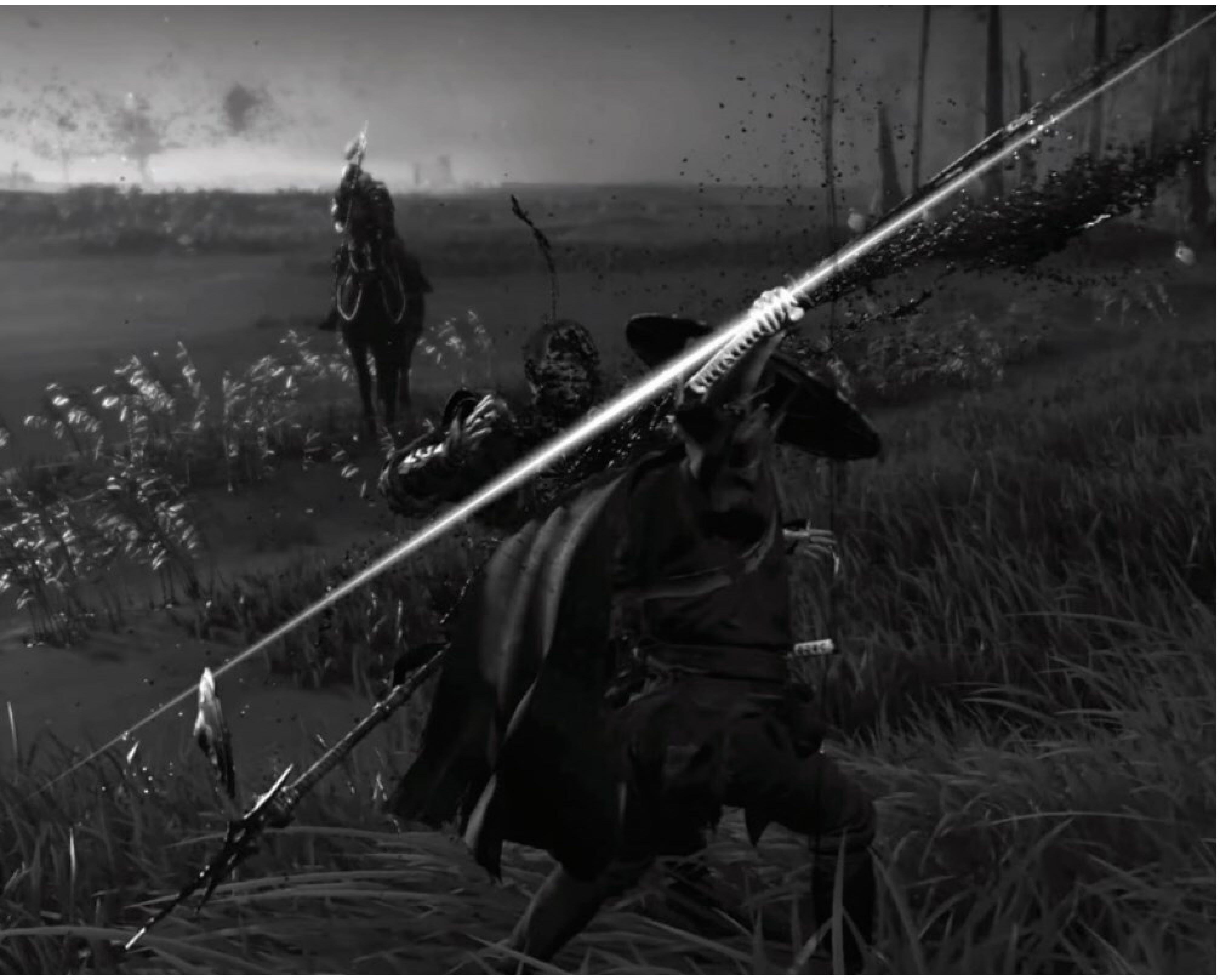
The most immediate change is that the series' traditional fall release date is being moved up to July. Given the disruption of the real NASCAR season and its resumption in May, having a new NASCAR Heat to play is welcome – and the new timeframe separates the series from the crowded fall pack. Unfortunately, the other effect of this transition is that NASCAR Heat 5 appears to focus more on incremental changes than big, new features.

The major structures of the game return, including its multi-series career mode (dirt, trucks, Xfinity cars, and the cup cars) and split-screen multiplayer (locally and online). These features all benefit from quality-of-life improvements, some of which fans have requested. DNFs, solo practice sessions (without A.I. cars), and reduced pit-stop times have been added, along with career stats so you can track your progress each season over the years. Customization in the form of increased paint booth options (such as coloring rims and spoilers) and the ability to create your own schedule of tracks also lets you put your stamp on your experience.

NASCAR Heat 4's A.I. was improved thanks to customization sliders (for aspects such as tire wear and pack spacing), but it still needed work in areas such as taming its rubberbanding and the lines taken on the track. Creative director Paul Coleman says the team wants to make the A.I. more competitive and consistent from track to track, which could mean a host of things during a race. Which areas end up being changed could go a long way to how the racing feels on the track.

With the behind-the-scenes developer changes and the shortened release schedule, it's no surprise that the ambitions for NASCAR Heat 5 are not as big as everyone would like. For example, 704Games admits that the series is locked into the current online structure, so the game won't have additions such as matchmaking or online practice sessions.

This relative stasis is a shame for a franchise that was slowly building momentum from release to release up until this point, but Coleman teased to us some of the areas Motorsport and 704Games want to address in future games that could take the series in exciting new directions, including expanding the career mode to deepen driver relationships and team contracts (possibly including a silly season). Until then, fans will have to find ways to work inside the proverbial box to find as much speed and grip as possible. » **Matthew Kato**



Ghost Of Tsushima

Play through this brutal revenge tale your way

The Mongols made a critical mistake in their invasion of Japan's Tsushima Island: They didn't double-check to make sure that Jin Sakai was dead. The warrior is very much alive, but his brush with death has changed him. Previously, this samurai would have adhered to a strict code of honor. Now, all bets are off as he pursues a mission of vengeance and redemption. Will you continue along the path of the noble swordsman? Or will you rely on treachery and distraction to take your enemies by surprise? Regardless of your decision, blood will be spilled, and the invaders will regret setting foot on Japanese soil.

Sucker Punch has been steadily revealing details about Ghost of Tsushima over the past few months. The latest look at its open-world samurai epic highlights the duality within Jin. Players have a variety of interesting tools at their disposal as they work to defeat the Mongol Empire and restore independence to Jin's countrymen.

We see a combat scenario play out two ways, to highlight the different approaches that are available. In the first, Jin walks into a Mongol encampment in full view of the invaders. A pair come close, one menacing the samurai with a spear, the other hanging back. In a flash, Jin unsheathes his blade and strikes the first man, hacking at the next in a seamless motion. From there, it's a methodical march of carnage. Swords clash, Jin slashes incoming arrows away, and enemy limbs are sliced off with ease.

In contrast, players can take the same situation on as the ghost. This is less honorable, but it seems no less exciting. This stealth-oriented approach relies on using tools such as wind chimes and fireworks to distract, with one-button assassinations used to seal the deal. These assassinations can be chained together, but the player can also use smoke bombs to get some breathing room if things get rough.

Player expression extends in other meaningful ways. Armor can be swapped out to augment your combat playstyle, including an array of options from traditional samurai fare to woven grass coats, jackets, and kimono. Players can also unlock charms, which have special combat abilities. For instance, you might be able to regenerate health outside of combat, or imbue your wind chimes with a poison vapor that kills enemies who pick them up,

The brutality of the combat choreography recalls classic samurai films, which is something Sucker Punch is leaning into. You can choose to play the game in either English or Japanese with optional English subtitles. You can also enable a black-and-white filter that adds film grain – it looks to be the next best thing to playing a Kurosawa film. Sucker Punch also further detailed its photo mode, where players can summon animations such as gales of wind to spice up their shots.

As it turns out, wind is another major element throughout the game. One of its more interesting aspects is how players can get navigational feedback through nature. According to creative/art director Jason Connell, the team wanted to let the island guide exploration. Instead of using a traditional breadcrumb trail to lead players to the next point of interest, for example, Jin can call on the wind to provide visual indicators on where to travel. Similarly, while riding his horse near a forest, a yellow bird flew by and kept pace, eventually leading him to an interaction with an NPC. Foxes can lead to shrines, too. In short, it looks as though players will be able to get critical information without filling the screen with distracting icons.

Sucker Punch definitely gave us all a lot to look forward to. Not only are we excited to learn more about the game itself, but we're eagerly awaiting one of the final remaining details: Will there be an enhanced version of Ghost of Tsushima on PlayStation 5? Hopefully that piece will fall in place soon.

» **Jeff Cork**

» **Platform**
PS4

» **Style**
1-Player Action

» **Publisher**
Sony Interactive Entertainment

» **Developer**
Sucker Punch Productions

» **Release**
July 17

reviews

EDITORS' CHOICE
ISSUE 326

80 Gears Tactics

In one fell swoop, Splash Damage and The Coalition revitalize the Gears franchise and the wider tactics genre with an excellent new adventure. Smart and aggressive mechanics, attractive visuals, and a solid narrative framework all add up to an intricate strategy challenge that is packed with action.

THE SCORING SYSTEM

10	Outstanding. A truly elite title that is nearly perfect in every way. This score is given out rarely and indicates a game that cannot be missed.	5	Flawed. It may be obvious that the game has lots of potential, but its most engaging features could be undeniably flawed or not integrated into the experience.
9	Superb. Just shy of gaming nirvana, this score is a high recommendation because the game reviewed is head-and-shoulders above its competition.	4	Bad. While some things work as planned, the majority of this title either malfunctions or it is so dull that the game falls short as a whole.
8	Very Good. Innovative, but perhaps not the right choice for everyone. This score indicates that there are many good things to be had, but arguably so.	3	Painful. If there is anything that's redeeming in a game of this caliber, it's buried beneath agonizing gameplay and uneven execution in its features or theme.
7	Average. The game's features may work, but are nothing that even casual players haven't seen before. A decent game from beginning to end.	2	Broken. Basically unplayable. This game is so insufficient in execution that any value would be derived in extremely small quantities, if at all.
6	Limited Appeal. Although there may be fans of games receiving this score, many will be left yearning for a more rewarding game experience.	1	Turnips IRL.

Trials Of Mana

Fun, but faithful to a fault

Style 1-Player Action/Role-Playing **Publisher** Square Enix **Developer** Square Enix **Release** April 24 **Rating** T

7.75

PS4 • Switch • PC

» Concept
Remake the third entry in the beloved Mana series with new visuals, voice acting, and various gameplay enhancements

» Graphics
While the classic sprites will always hold the most allure for me, the 3D graphics look decent and help bring the vibrant and inviting world to life, even if some NPC designs leave much to be desired

» Sound
The new remixed tracks keep the series' essence alive, giving personality to the world and bringing intensity to battles. The voice acting feels embarrassingly phoned in, with stilted dialogue and awkward deliveries

» Playability
Trials of Mana is a simple action/RPG on the surface, but there's more to it than button mashing. Just don't expect too much guidance for the more complex parts

» Entertainment
This action/RPG excels in its fast-paced combat and intense boss battles, but a few frustrating elements ruin the fun

» Replay Value
Moderate

The beloved Mana series hasn't traveled an easy road. After earning accolades in the '90s, the franchise has struggled to capture the same magic in a modern landscape. People began to wonder if the series had seen its last days, but 2018's Secret of Mana remake showed Square Enix still had a place for the fan-favorite property. That remake didn't exactly do justice to the original, and now the team is trying again with a remake of Trials of Mana.

Did they learn their lessons? Trials of Mana is definitely an improvement over the Secret of Mana remake, but it still comes with many of the same problems; I still noticed poor A.I., questionable voice performances, and technical hiccups – just to a lesser degree. Even so, this is probably the most fun I've had with a Mana game in a long time, and that's thanks to smooth combat, amazing boss fights, and cool ways to upgrade your characters.

Trials of Mana still retains its classic elements and feel. It's a linear and straightforward RPG, and the remake sticks close to the original story and structure. Because players form a party of three from the six available heroes, I like the replay value in selecting different characters and experiencing their stories and different fighting styles. Seeing how the characters' adventures intersect is intriguing, especially learning the tragic events that gave them something to fight for. However, Square Enix may have stayed too true to the original script, which creates issues in terms of presentation. The dialogue is extremely unnatural, so all the voice acting sounds stilted. It doesn't help that, while the voice acting is a slight improvement over the previous remake, the production sounds amateurish, with weird pauses and horrible accents. Do yourself a favor and stick to subtitles.

The real draw of Trials of Mana is its fantastic action-oriented combat. Combat plays fast and smooth, as you have access to strong, weak, and aerial attacks alongside special moves and dodging abilities. On the surface, this all sounds simple, but it becomes a game of chaining together combos, avoiding spells, and canceling out enemy's larger attacks by striking at opportune moments. The addition of a jump button also comes in handy for avoiding attacks and more combo options. There's never a dull moment on the battlefield, and I enjoy that kind of frenzy.

Every character in your party plays differently, and you can swap with the touch of a button. This means you can easily go from an up-close brawler like Kevin to spellcaster like Charlotte. It not only gives you variety in how you fight, but also can play into your strategy, especially if you want to knock out an enemy and create a flurry of special moves. As you level up and open new classes, you gain access to more powerful combos and moves to keep things interesting. I enjoyed being able to build my characters to a certain degree by investing points in their stats and unlocking different perks for battles, like auto-heal or increased critical odds.

The bosses are high points of the journey; they're creative, memorable, require different strategies, and let you prove your mastery of the battle system. More than a few got my adrenaline pumping. Unfortunately, boss battles expose your party member A.I's weaknesses. This was a huge issue in the Secret of Mana remake, and while it isn't as prevalent, it still stands as a common frustration.

Having to babysit your A.I.'s health isn't fun, but the worst part is that they just don't have any awareness for incoming attacks. For instance, if the enemy is launching an AoE attack, I swap characters to move my allies out of the way, and what do they do? They run straight back into the attack for deadly damage. You can adjust their tactics, but none of the options fix this. I didn't have issues with them in regular battles, but constantly healing and reviving them during boss fights is annoying – especially since the game renders you helpless to prevent it. The original Trials of Mana had co-op, which might have alleviated some of these issues, but that feature is not included in this version.

While I enjoyed my time busting up baddies and scouring every inch of the land for treasures, the remake does not remove the repetition or grinding that was present in the original. The structure of the game has you going back and forth to the same dungeons. They usually have a different area or boss within them, but I would have appreciated not trekking through the same content to access them. The world seems wondrous at first, but all of the recycled content makes it less exciting over time.

It may look more modern, but Trials of Mana is a faithful remake outside of its combat tweaks – and that isn't necessarily a good thing. But as a fan of the original, parts of this game are still charming. I adored the combat and boss fights (when my A.I. cooperated), and even with some of its repetitive nature and horrible voice acting, I didn't want to put the game down. It's a decent remake but not the fantastic one it could have been. This series has so much potential, I'd just love to see it fully realized. » **Kimberley Wallace**

Streets Of Rage 4

Return to the old-school neighborhood

7

Style 1 to 4-Player Action (2-Player Online) **Publisher** Dotemu **Developer** Lizardcube, Guard Crush Games, Dotemu **Release** April 30 **Rating** T

PS4 • Xbox One
Switch • PC

» **Concept**
Create a sequel to one of the best 2D brawler series of the '90s, remaining faithful to the content and gameplay of its predecessors

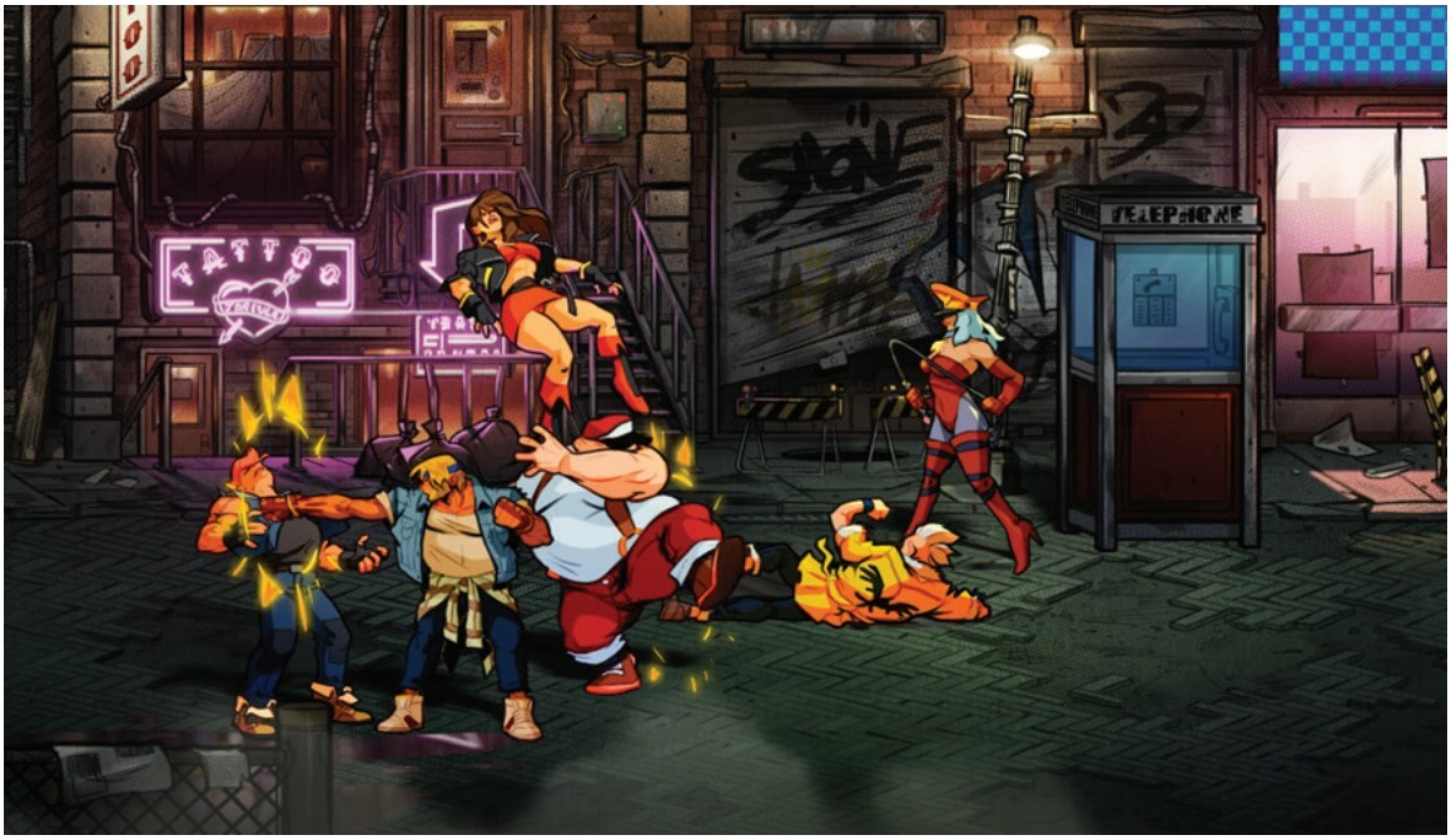
» **Graphics**
A revamped artistic approach makes the world and characters pop. However, when you unlock the pixelated classic characters, they clash with the new visual style

» **Sound**
Numerous songs from previous Streets of Rage composers ensures that the music fits the action. The new soundtrack is good, but you can also switch to retro music from Streets of Rage 1 and 2

» **Playability**
The controls are approachable and familiar. Combat isn't just about button-mashing, but your limited repertoire of moves gets stale

» **Entertainment**
Streets of Rage 4 is a fun stroll down memory lane, but it doesn't have enough depth to completely pull players in

» **Replay Value**
Moderately high



To me, the brawlers of the '90s represent the perfect arcade-style experience. They are easy to pick up and play, difficult to master, and full of nonstop action. Even though the Streets of Rage series technically wasn't in arcades, Sega's original Genesis trilogy embodies everything that made this genre so popular in its heyday. Now, 25 years since the last installment, Streets of Rage 4 remains devoted to that specific tradition – a fact that elevates this sequel while also dragging it down.

Streets of Rage 4 uses the classic games as templates, borrowing the structure and concepts to assemble an experience that feels like a natural successor. You (and your co-op friends) clean up crime in a grimy city by beating up an array of punks and toughs. Walking through a series of side-scrolling stages, you lay down the law with punches, kicks, throws, and special moves – with a little help from health-restoring food you eat off the ground.

The action looks and feels great, with satisfying impacts every time you land a blow, and enemies flying across the screen at the end of a combo. The slick new visual style gives the world and characters a different look, but the gameplay is unmistakably old-school. You have a basic suite of moves that doesn't evolve or change, you fight wave after wave of enemies that require minimal strategy, and you get hit by cheap shots from off-screen. Sometimes this combination produces nostalgic thrills – but it is often just boring. Functionally, Streets of Rage 4 feels similar to booting up a 2D brawler in a compilation of 16-bit classics. On one hand, replicating that experience authentically is an achievement. On the other hand, resuscitating a 25-year-old formula without any compelling additions or twists makes it feel more like a relic than a return.

Even if it's archaic, at least it's faithful; Streets of Rage 4 pays loving tribute to its source material. The teams at Lizardcube, Guard Crush Games, and Dotemu have mined the series' history to create a treasure trove of references, tributes, and cameos. You pound familiar-but-redesigned foes like Signals and Galsias, as well as fresh interpretations of iconic bosses. Even the new playable characters fit in well with the recognizable faces; I especially like Floyd, whose grab and throw moves make him feel especially brutal and flexible. But if you prefer the old characters, you also unlock pixelated playable heroes from the original trilogy. Plus, swapping between the classic and new soundtracks (both of which fit the action well) is a nice touch. With so many nods, Streets of Rage 4 is a fitting celebration of this franchise.

The big problem is Streets of Rage 4 is too focused on looking back, and it doesn't move forward. Your brawls are entertaining in the moment, but they don't have the complexity to inspire the multiple playthroughs required to see everything the game offers. The biggest incentive you have is to keep racking up points to unlock new playable characters – which you can then use to fight through the same levels. The heroes all play a little differently, but not enough to dull the repetition of the encounters. You can increase the difficulty if you want additional challenge, but that isn't the real issue; without any meaningful progression or persistence, it feels like you're just a different hamster running in the same wheel.

Playing games with friends is fun, so local and online co-op (with a max of four and two players, respectively) can help inject some new life into the conflict. Having additional sets of fists to distract bosses and break up crowds can be a life-saver in the main campaign. But the additional modes, like competitive battles between players and boss rush, are more diversions than destinations.

Streets of Rage 4's simple approach to combat and content is enjoyable in short bursts, but it doesn't have the hooks to keep you coming back. This beat 'em up feels like an homage to the '90s, but it's also stuck in that era.
» **Joe Juba**

Predator: Hunting Grounds

Not quite at its apex

Style 1 to 5-Player Online Shooter **Publisher** Sony Interactive Entertainment **Developer** Illfonic **Release** April 24 **Rating** M

The alien warriors from the Predator films are irresistibly equipped for video games. These fearsome hunters not only look formidable, but they come complete with a wide array of memorable gadgets, including their optical cloaking camo, shoulder-mounted plasmacasters, and – if worse comes to worst – self-destruct nukes. Gamers have been either fighting off the bug-faced Yautja or playing as them since the NES days, with varying results. Illfonic is the latest developer to step up to the challenge of adapting this alien race, in the form of an asymmetrical humans-versus-predator shooter. At its best, Predator: Hunting Grounds is as close as you'd want to get to sharing a jungle with these green-blooded killers, though dull missions and limited map selections don't make for a particularly lengthy hunting season.

Illfonic's previous title was Friday the 13th: The Game, which offered a similar four-versus-one setup. Unlike the relatively helpless campers in that experience, however, players don't have to rely on hiding in closets or calling for help as they're stalked by a powerful entity. Your four-person fireteam is more than capable of downing this intruder, provided you work together and take advantage of your superior numbers. The predator may pack more firepower than a Cabela's warehouse, but it still bleeds. And if it bleeds, as the saying goes, that means you can kill it.

Hunting Grounds doesn't just dump everyone into an arena and call it a day. Instead, both sides spawn in different spots in the South American jungle, which is a dead ringer for the lush foliage in the original 1987 film. When the match starts, the fireteam has a series of objectives they need to complete before they can get to the chopper and their successful extraction. Whether you're tracking down stolen artifacts, getting data from servers, or destroying a drug operation, they all generally play out the same: You head to the next waypoint, find the object that's highlighted, and hold down the interact button. Then it's off to the next set, and then the eventual exfiltration.

In Predator lore, the creatures are drawn to heat and conflict. When you engage with the braindead human A.I., your fireteam isn't in any real danger. The guerrillas are equipped with glorified Nerf guns, and aside from snipers and heavies, their shots don't require much first aid afterward. The real danger comes with the noise that you generate when you return fire. Every gunshot you make has the potential of sending up a visual flare to the predator player, if they happen to be looking in the right direction.

If you're on the human side, you engage with the A.I. and predator in a first-person view. The predator gets to experience combat via a third-person camera, which gives you a bit of an edge if you're playing that role. It fits with the creature's enhanced perception, which is further upgraded with its infrared vision. When activated, you can scan the world for blips of heat, which mark potential targets. Jump in too early, and you risk giving up your position. The predator is formidable, but it's not invulnerable.

Getting the hang of the predator role takes some learning, and unfortunately you do most of that learning in live matches. That's a shame, because fighting against a poorly acclimated predator isn't fun; it turns what's usually a tense confrontation into unintentional comedy – and it usually ends with a dead predator. And it's even less fun when you happen to be that dead predator. On the other hand, I had a blast when I was matched up against players making full use of the predator suite of abilities.

The predator is certainly more of a draw than the comparatively generic humans it faces, and the queue times reflect that. I waited about five minutes each time I wanted to play as the alien hunter, compared to a minute or so as the fireteam. The predator also gets a better overall deal in the cosmetics department. The default character looks great, and the customization options let you change up your mask, armor, skin pattern and coloring, dreadlocks, and more. Humans have comparatively scant options, aside from a ton of underwhelming weapon shaders.

The other unlocks, which include new weapons, perks, and class archetypes, are more interesting. I had a decent time coming up with different builds, experimenting with a pure anti-predator loadout before eventually settling on a support role designed to help keep my squad alive and well armed. That flexibility helps to keep the action fresh, but with only a handful of maps and only one real game mode, it's hard not to get the sense that you've seen everything there is to see after a few dozen matches.

Hunting Grounds treats the character and setting with reverence, which, as a fan of the movies, is easy to appreciate. If you're looking for an authentic predator experience, this is as good as it's gotten. And fittingly, it's perhaps best enjoyed the way the predators have interacted with humanity: drop in, enjoy the hunt, and get out while you can.

» **Jeff Cork**

7.25

PS4 • PC

» **Concept**
Capture the essence of the '80s action movie in asymmetrical matchups, as either the titular alien warrior or a member of a military squad

» **Graphics**
The predator is the star of the show, with nearly every element of its design and arsenal lovingly recreated. Humans don't fare as well, with odd loping animations

» **Sound**
Alan Silvestri's memorable score adds gravitas to the action, and the predator's snarls and chatters are as unnerving as ever. Human dialogue, on the other hand, has a strange echoing effect

» **Playability**
An all-too-brief tutorial does little to fully acclimate players to the predator's nuanced gameplay. The fireteam can rely on traditional FPS instincts, but getting comfortable with the hunter may take a few rounds

» **Entertainment**
Hunting Grounds sets the table for thrilling cat-and-mouse battles or embarrassing farces; the quality of each match is ultimately up to players. When everyone's dialed into their roles, it's a lot of fun

» **Replay Value**
High

Gears Tactics

Impressive battles in a quagmire war

8.5

PC

» Concept
Translate the Gears universe into a turn-based strategy format, and keep all the curb-stomping and chainsaw guns intact

» Graphics
Sharp cinematics and varied battle animations lend a greater sense of realism than many games in the genre

» Sound
Gruff soldiers are believably voiced, and the music recalls earlier franchise entries, but the tunes don't have enough variety

» Playability
Well-explained systems work admirably in battle and in the upgrade menus, though the difficulty curve is uneven

» Entertainment
Inject some much-needed adrenaline and storytelling into the tactics milieu, even if the campaign wears out its welcome

» Replay Value
Moderate

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ISSUE 326

Style 1-Player Strategy **Publisher** Xbox Games Studio
Developer Splash Damage, The Coalition **Release** April 28 **Rating** M

With its cover-based shooting, varied enemy types, and bombastic tone, the Gears franchise is a great fit for the tactics genre. The world and the feel of combat both remain intact in this transition to turn-based warfare. With a focus on characters and story, plus a sense of speed and flexibility in battle, Gears Tactics manage to outstrip most competitors in the genre. Despite some pacing issues that leave the content feeling stretched thin over too many hours, this is a challenging and rewarding experience.

Gears Tactics jumps its storyline back to the beginning of the conflict between humans and the Locust Horde. The plot remains thankfully manageable and contained, following a ragtag team of soldiers and their quest to take down one particularly nasty baddie. Within that framework, the slightly cliched characters and events are given life through attractive cinematics and emotionally engaged vocal leads. The narrative feels self-contained for newcomers, but adds important new wrinkles to the lore for longtime fans.

Battles play out as objective-focused affairs, in which one to four squadmates square off against a frequently overwhelming number of monstrous enemies, while also aiming to meet one or more goals. In many ways, this new twist on Gears takes its cues from the modern-day XCOM games, but with some meaningful twists. With three actions, characters can flexibly move, attack, and use abilities in any combination, all in one turn, giving any one soldier tremendous utility. Overwatch, where a character can set remaining actions to guard a line-of-sight area, plays a huge role in success, encouraging the focus on defensive cover play that characterizes the broader franchise. It also results in satisfying moments, like setting up devastating kill-boxes as the hordes charge into the grinder. In addition, an engaging mechanic allows players to execute downed enemies to give everyone on the team an extra action, which becomes an enormously fun risk/reward dynamic.

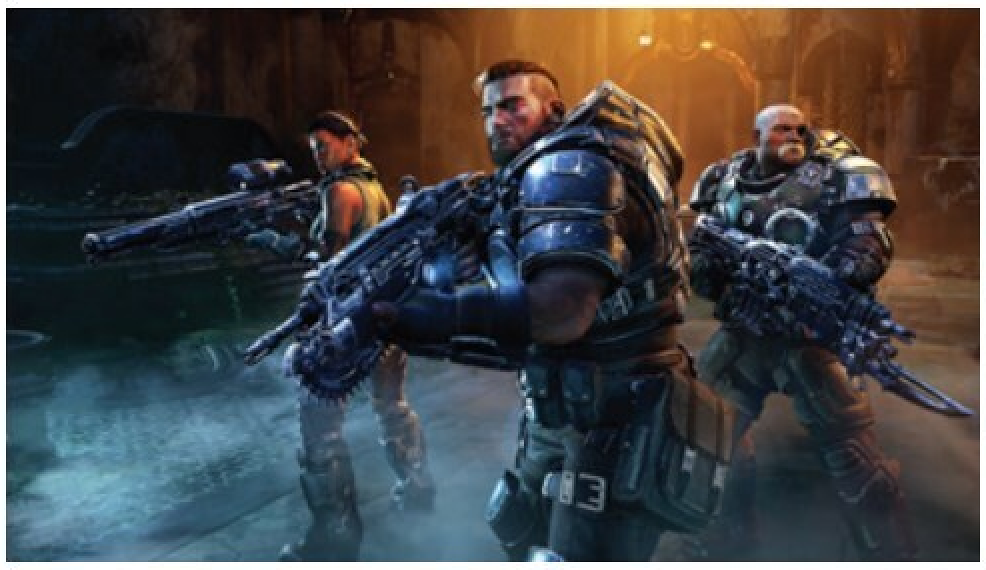
The fully rotating 3D battlefields are intelligently designed, demanding careful observation and positioning. Verticality and degrading cover add more complexity and depth. Even in this new isometric view, the characters and backgrounds maintain much of the detail and "ruined beauty" aesthetic of the franchise, and that visual crispness helps aid tactical decision-making. I only rarely encountered skewed views or perspectives that resulted in a deployment mistake.

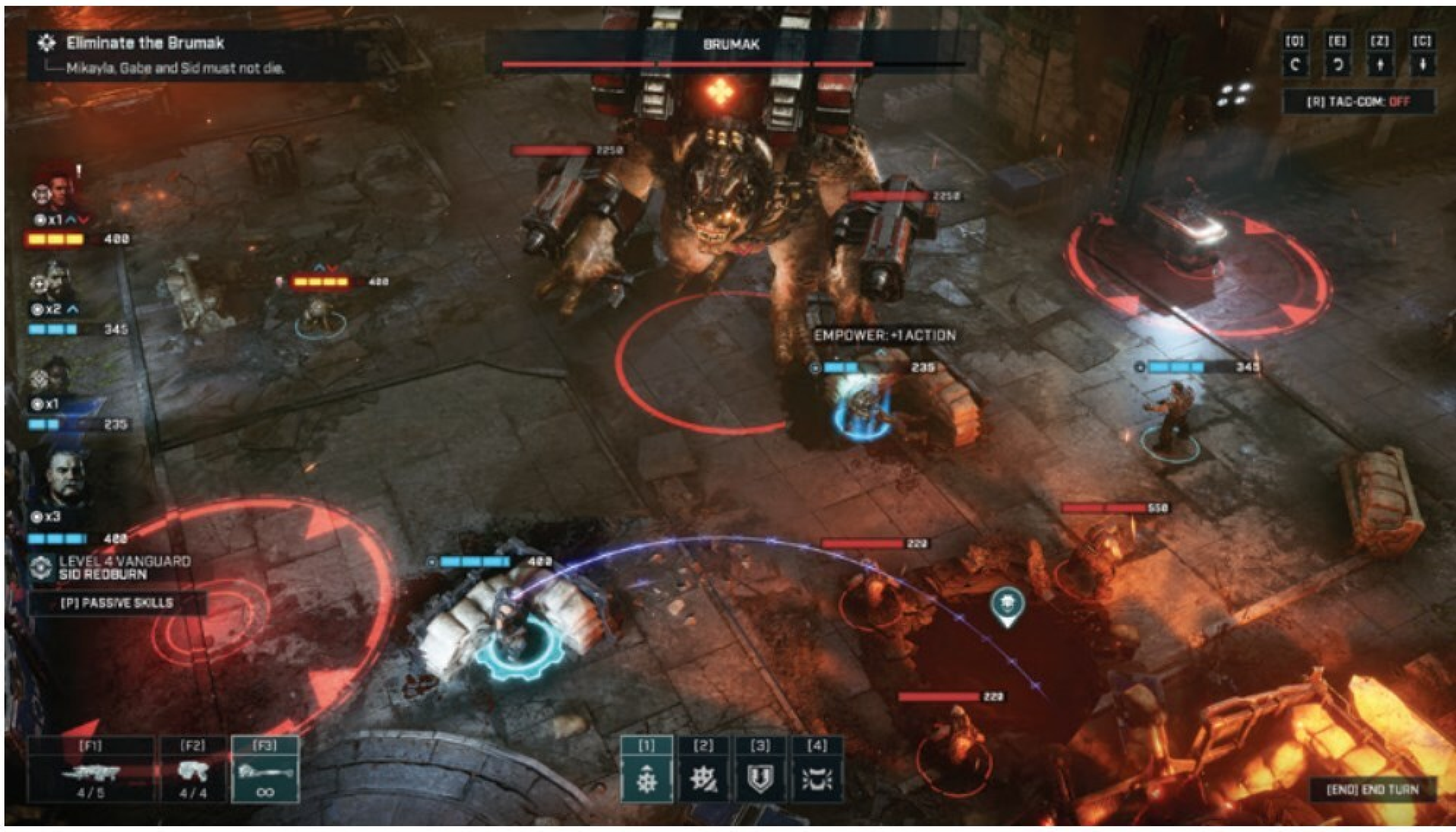
Between missions, the gradual squad leveling, cosmetic customization, and equipment modding lend an almost RPG quality to progression. I enjoyed the class variety, and how even within familiar roles like sniper or support, I had plenty of room to make each hero stand apart. I also like the weapon and armor modding, but the task of managing all the acquired pieces eventually starts to feel like a chore.

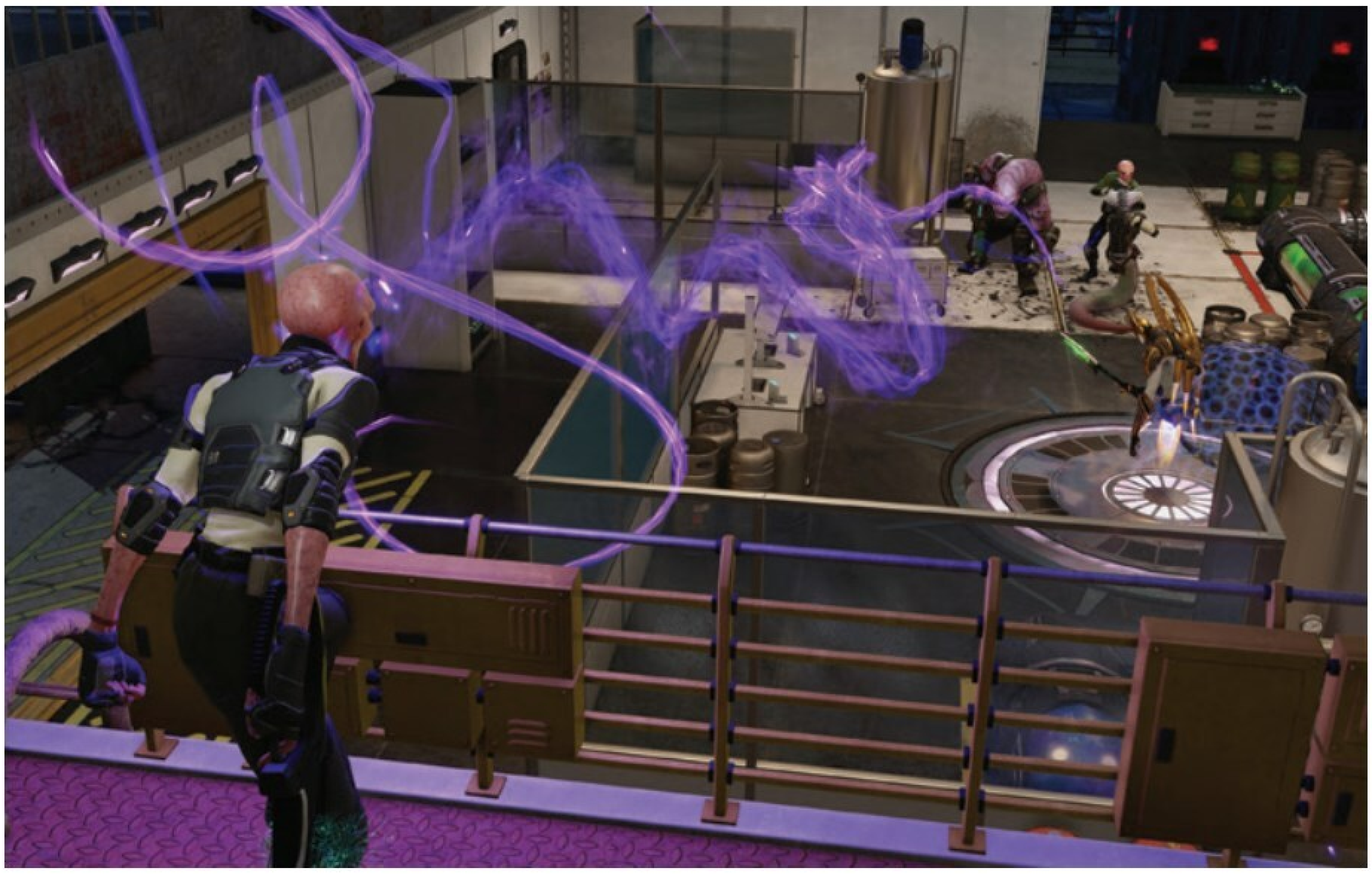
In the early hours, I consistently enjoyed the mix of deadly combat and character improvement. However, the lengthy campaign increasingly rubbed me the wrong way. The introduction of required side missions needlessly extends the game's length and ultimately halts any sense of momentum or pacing within the story. These side missions, which are drawn from just a few different objective pools, feel repetitive and stale. And strangely, several of them offer dramatic bumps in difficulty, far outstripping the story missions in the same section.

That sense of unnecessary time dilation begins to present itself in all the missions, with drawn-out battles that slip away from the series' trademark burst of adrenaline. Nowhere is that truer than the three act-ending boss fights. While each offers initially fearsome encounters against mammoth creatures, the high hit-point totals and endless waves of spawning minions are exhausting. That's especially true in a gruelingly long final boss fight, which is a tiring endurance bout rather than a satisfying challenge that puts your skills to the test.

Stilted pacing blunts some of the aggressive joy in Gears Tactics, but I still walked away impressed. At the heart of any engaging tactics games is the sense of emergent moments, where careful skill usage and planning leads to clutch wins. Taking control of a squad of COGs in this adventure, I repeatedly encountered those moments, along with the thrill of a narrow victory. This is a solid new front in the Gears theater of war, and one worthy of additional opportunities to grow. » **Matt Miller**







XCOM: Chimera Squad

A new kind of goon squad

Style 1-Player Strategy **Publisher** 2K Games
Developer Firaxis Games **Release** April 24 **Rating** T

8

At the end of XCOM 2, the human resistance overcame impossible odds to overthrow an oppressive alien hegemony controlling our planet. Now, freed from their shackles, humanity must find a way to live in harmony with the eclectic alien races that now call Earth home. Chimera Squad is a standalone strategy game in which you manage an elite team of hardened warriors from across the cosmos, putting out cultural fires and hunting down anyone who aims to disrupt Earth's fragile alliance. Their methods are radical and often explosive, and sometimes they make a few wrong moves – just like the game itself.

Firaxis smartly expands on XCOM 2's existing mechanics with a new system called Breach Mode. At the beginning of each encounter, your soldiers can plan their entrance onto the battlefield. During a breach, you are presented with several entry points, each with its own advantages and disadvantages. For example, a surprise back-door assault might give your units an aim advantage, but the first unit through the door is marked by the enemy and easier to hit. Weighing the costs and benefits for each breach point is fun, and wiping several enemies off the board during the initial onslaught is always satisfying.

Some of Chimera Squad's other changes are less successful. Instead of issuing commands to all your units at the same time, Chimera Squad features a new interwoven attack order. Each units' turn is listed on a timeline on the side of the screen, and your units' attacks are often shuffled between enemy attacks. On one hand, the timeline adds a neat strategic element; many soldiers have special moves that can alter that timeline, like rallying your troops into action early or delaying an enemy assault. On the other hand, this new approach makes it harder to coordinate your units' attacks. Since enemies often attack between each of your units, they have a greater chance to disrupt your plans. As a result, I fell back on the same attacks and maneuvers for each hero that seemed to work the best, rather than coordinating assaults based on context.

The XCOM series is well-known for its intricate turn-based action. Chimera Squad augments those systems with a few clever ideas, but some of the new systems don't play well with XCOM's existing foundation. The interwoven turn order and removal of permadeath are fun experiments, but they ultimately weaken XCOM's delicately balanced action. Chimera Squad is a neat standalone project, but it doesn't stand as tall as the rest of the series. » **Ben Reeves**

PC

» **Concept**
Manage an odd mix of aliens and super-powered humans as they maintain a fragile peace within a city ready to boil over

» **Graphics**
New comic book-inspired cutscenes are full of style, but the lack of customization options for your heroes feels like a downgrade

» **Sound**
The futuristic soundtrack is subdued but solid, and the new character voicework helps you to get to know all your soldiers

» **Playability**
These tense firefights test your composure under pressure. Sadly, the new interwoven turn order reduces some of your tactical capability

» **Entertainment**
Chimera Squad's action remains incredibly rich, but the slightly repetitive combat mars the overall thrill

» **Replay Value**
Moderately high

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8 Deliver Us The Moon

Platform PS4 • Xbox One • PC
Release April 24 (PS4, Xbox One), October 10, 2019 (PC) **Rating** T

Deliver Us the Moon's writing is the driving force, but this sci-fi journey is also strong in its pacing and variety, which help build momentum, create tension, and make it seem like every second matters even though you mostly play at your own pace. – Andrew Reiner

8 MotoGP 20

Platform PS4 • Xbox One • Switch
Stadia • PC
Release April 23 **Rating** E

The high-speed, demanding bikes require a slightly different approach from the traditional race-car techniques I'm accustomed to, breeding an internal competition for understanding and mastery that leads to a heightened tension on the track. – Matthew Kato

8 Sakura Wars

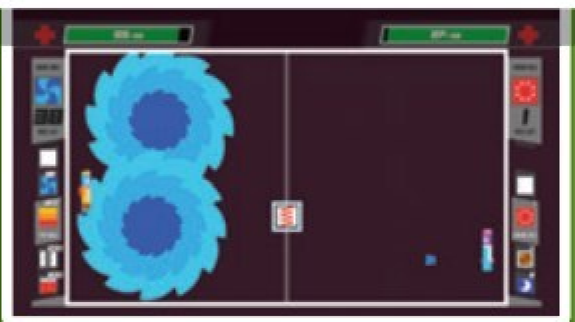
Platform PS4 **Release** April 28 **Rating** T

Sakura Wars is an interesting blend of a visual novel, dating sim, and mech-centric combat. It takes place in Tokyo during a fictionalized version of the Taisho period, and has a bonkers premise that sees players helping to run a theater while also protecting citizens from monstrous threats. – Kimberley Wallace

7.25 Pong Quest

Platform Switch • PC
Release April 21 (PC), May 7 (Switch)
Rating E

Pong Quest delivers a fun and unique take on the well-known classic, but the novelty wears thin before the brief campaign comes to a close. – Brian Shea



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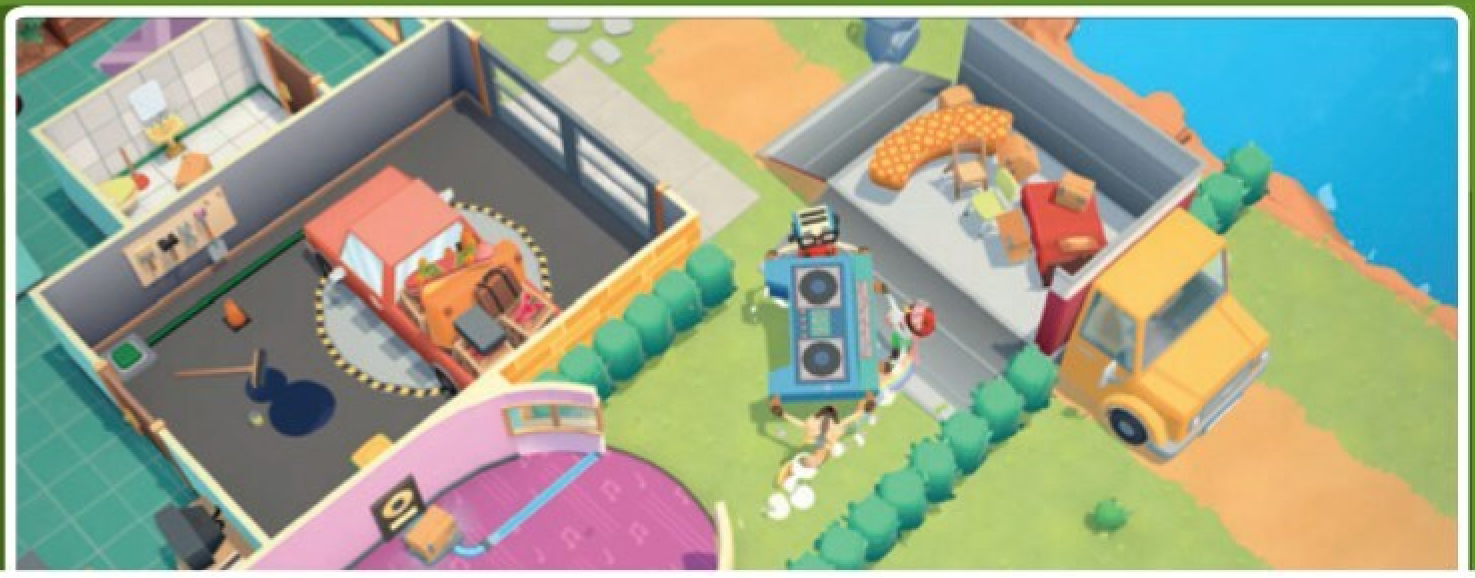

6.5 Moving Out

Platform PS4 • Xbox One • Switch • PC **Release** April 28 **Rating** E

Maybe you'll get hung up on an invisible barrier around a doorway. Perhaps your throw will land weirdly short, dropping a fragile package in the pool. There doesn't seem to be much rhyme or reason for a lot of these goofs; even if you're able to clearly call out what the team needs to do next, performing what should be simple actions feels like you're rolling the dice. – Jeff Cork

8 Super Mega Baseball 3

Platform PS4 • Xbox One • Switch • PC **Release** May 12 **Rating** E

People think of tradition when they think of baseball, but that doesn't mean you can't do things a little differently to still give fans a good representation of the sport. – Matthew Kato

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My First Game

Brian Fargo – The Labyrinth of Martagon

InXile Entertainment CEO Brian Fargo has had an impressive career. As the founder of Interplay, he helped jumpstart franchises like Wasteland, Battle Chess, Fallout, and Baldur's Gate. Before founding two different video game companies, Fargo was a passionate programmer and post-apocalyptic enthusiast who rushed home from high school to make games with his friends.

by Ben Reeves

Navigating The Labyrinth

"The first game I ever designed was called The Labyrinth of Martagon, and we only knew how to program in Basic, so it was pretty basic. Me and Michael Cranford, the guy who went on to do Bard's Tale, would work on it together. It was almost like a puzzle-room game. I would program it, and then Cranford would come over, and he'd try to figure it out. Then he would take my computer – because his parents wouldn't give him one – he took my Apple II to his house for the weekend, and he'd make his puzzle room. Then I'd try to get through his puzzle. We'd go back and forth like that all summer. Then we strung everything together and put it out. That was the first game. I'm certain that I have the only packaging of it in the world. I think we sold 12 copies. I can't find the disc, though, which is sad, so that is lost to the sands of time.

"Cranford did the artwork, so that's his art on the box. We just took our game to a few local game stores, and one of them sold a few copies. There wasn't much to choose from back then. It was just a little hobby business. Things were so innocent back then. It was great."

Guerilla Marketing

"I remember [the graphical text adventure] The Demon's Forge, which was the first game that I did by myself in '83. And I remember I had one friend who got it, and he thought it was okay to call me at all hours of the night for a hint.

"There was one game distributor, Ingram Micro, so you could get them to hit some of the stores nationwide. Otherwise, it was really like guerilla warfare. The story I always love to tell is that I would call stores around the country to sell my game. *Softalk* magazine was like the main computer magazine at the time. There were other ones like *Byte*, which were a little more technical, but *Softalk* was a bit more casual, but still hardcore. I took out an ad in *Softalk*, and then I would call stores around the country and say, 'Hey, I just saw the latest *Softalk*. Did you see that Demon's Forge game? Seems pretty good. I'd like to maybe buy a copy if you order some.' Then I'd hang up, and my phone would ring because they'd call my order line. That was my distribution plan." ◆

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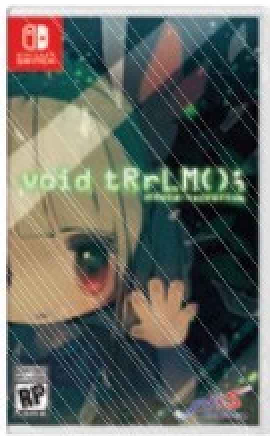
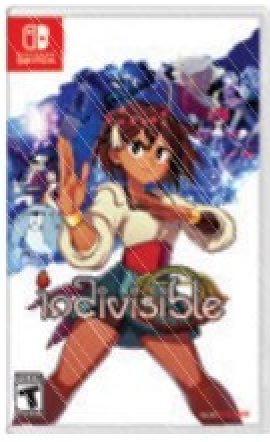


Also on PS4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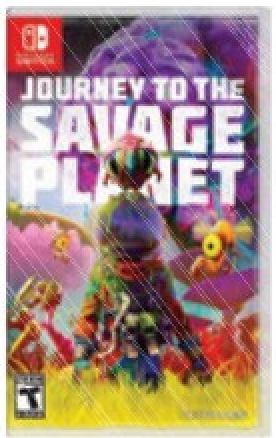
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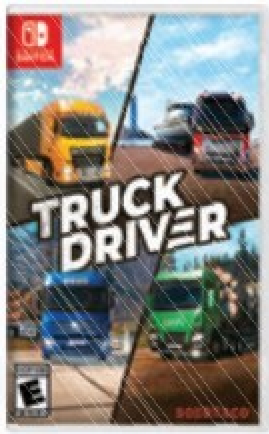
Also on NSW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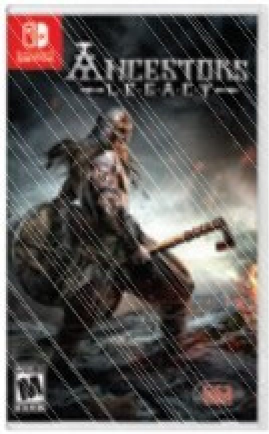
THOSE WHO REMAIN

Collar X Malice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